

## Beyond the Ripple by GreenLily474

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**Summary:** Sequel to MKUltra Ripple. \*\*\*\*\*Note: Chapter 12 is the birth of their first babies. \*\*\*Eleven and Will are in their mid-twenties and leading successful adult lives when their past comes back to haunt them. Mike is put into a difficult position as he tries to protect them. They must learn to be happy and live their lives again.

# 1. Chapter 1 A Brief Family History

## Chapter One

1958

The weather was nice and sunny. The Hawkins High School freshmen were enjoying the first day of summer by the quarry. They should have been, at least. They had just survived their first year of highschool, after all. Several freshman boys were pinned to the ground by local greaser gang members. Jim Hopper and Bob Newby were among them.

Joyce Preston watched in horror and anger as she stood with a group of girls that included Karen Bryce. "We have to do something!" said Joyce as her hands trembled and she rapidly tapped her foot on the ground."

Karen grabbed or arm. "No, Joyce! That'll only make it worse. They'll leave after they have their fun."

The greaser that was pinning down Joyce's best friend Jim started to slowly move a burning cigarette toward his eye. Joyce pulled herself from Karen's grasp and started running toward the group as fast as she could in saddle shoes. "STOP IT! LEAVE THEM ALONE!"

"Well, look at this, boys. A girl's trying to come to your rescue," said the greaser pinning down Bob. "I bet that makes you feel like a real man, Bob the Brain!" He began to rub Bob's head in the dirt.

"I bet all of you feel like real men picking on kids half your size," Joyce spat.

"We may stop if you ask nicely," said one of the greasers as he sauntered toward her.

"Leave them alone-*please!*" said Joyce.

"Leaving them alone would mean we're doing something for you. You want us to do something for you, you're going to have to do something for us."

"What do you want me to *do* for you?" asked Joyce irritably. The greaser stepped uncomfortably close to Joyce. She willed herself not to be intimidated.

"Oh I can think a thing or two," the greaser raised his eyebrows and tugged at the collar of Joyce's blouse. She froze.

"Are you stupid or something, Vince?" asked another greaser as he let go of the kid he was pinning down.

"Who are you calling stupid, Lonnie?" asked Vince.

"We're over 18, she ain't. You wanna go to prison?"

"We've got nothing to worry about. This is Joyce Preston. Everyone knows she ain't right in the head. Who's gonna believe her?"

"I don't know, Vince. Maybe *everyone* here! Let's have her do something else." Lonnie pulled out a cigarette, lit it and held it out to Joyce. "Finish this."

"Joyce, don't do it," yelled Bob. The greaser pinning him down punched him in the side. Joyce glanced around frantically at the other boys and her eyes landed on Jim. His capture was still holding the burning cigarette dangerously close to his face.

Joyce glared at Lonnie and snatched the cigarette from him. She took a puff and broke into a stream of coughs.

"Good start," said Lonnie with a smirk. "Keep going. Finish it."

"*Finish it! Finish it! Finish it!*" the greasers chanted. Joyce took one drag after another. It became gradually easier and calmed her.

"Done!" she said when only the butt remained.

"A deal's a deal. Let 'em go boys," said Lonnie. Joyce dropped the cigarette butt on the ground and crushed it with her foot as the freshmen boys gasped for breath when the greasers let them up and started walking away.

Lonnie stepped closer to Joyce, put his hand on her shoulder and

placed his face within an inch of hers. "I just did you a favor, Babe. Remember that." He patted her cheek and walked away.

Joyce doubled over and started throwing up. "Joyce are you alright?" asked Bob. Joyce nodded.

"WE'RE GOING TO GET YOU FOR THIS SOMEDAY. WE'LL SHOW YOU!" Hopper shouted angrily.

"Hop, no! Let it go!" said Joyce as she grabbed his arm and pulled him back.

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Lonnie grabbed a beer out of the fridge when he got home. His father entered the kitchen.

"Didn't think you'd be home from work yet," said Lonnie as he opened the bottle and took a drink.

"I heard some disturbing rumors," said Edmund Byers as he adjusted his glasses. "Apparently some guys your age were bullying some of the freshmen by the quarry."

"Relax, old man, I took care of it."

"Lonnie, picking on kids, your mother and I raised you better than that."

"You sure as hell didn't raise me to be a man," said Lonnie. "I had to figure that out on my own,"

"Lonnie, please, let's talk."

"There's nothing to talk about," said Lonnie.

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1971

"So, Joyce won't be hurt by this?" asked Lonnie.

"She'll be fine," said Dr. Brenner. "She won't even remember. And if

she does, just convince her she's delusional.

"So she's having twins and the kids have abilities? How can you be sure?"

"Mr. Byers, I've been working on the MKUltra program for almost 20 years. I know what I saw in your wife's test results. Your son Jonathan doesn't have any abilities, but if he has any children: they might have abilities."

"And you want to take both of the babies?"

"If all goes as planned, yes. If not, we'll only that the first one that comes out and wait several years to take the other one. Your wife doesn't know she's having twins. Leaving one of them with her will create a plausible cover. Terry Ives had already been a lot of trouble. She refuses to believe her daughter is dead. Maternal instincts are quite inconvenient."

"Okay, we have a deal," said Lonnie. He shook Brenner's hand and left the room.

"Do you still want to go ahead with the plans for his father?" asked Agent One.

"We need Joyce Byers to feel as isolated as possible," said Dr. Brenner. "Edmund Byers did a lot of great work during World War II. He's a brilliant engineer. And worse for us, he's a brilliant man who opposes the kind of work we do.. If one or two of his grandchildren goes missing, he's likely to figure things out, and we can't have that."

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"Edmund!" said Joyce as she opened the door.

"Hey there Joycy," said Edmund as he kissed his daughter-in-law on the cheek. "Where's my grandson, I brought him a present." Edmund held up a stuffed Thumper.

"Oh, he'll love that. He likes to 'read' Thumper to the baby all the time," Joyce patted her swelling belly.

"He'll be a great big brother then," said Edmund as he followed Joyce into the living room.

"Grandpa!" said Jonathan. He ran to his grandfather and hugged his leg.

"Hey there, Johnny! I got you something." Edmund held out the stuffed Thumper and Jonathan clapped his hands in delight.

"Thumper! Thumper! Thumper!" Jonathan took the stuffed rabbit and hugged it.

"He really likes pictures, doesn't he?" asked Edmund as he pointed to the photos.

"He loves them," said Joyce. "He has this really adorable hyper focused look on his face when he's going through them."

"Maybe he'll be a world famous photographer someday," said Edmund.

"Not if I can help it," said Lonnie as he entered the room. "I'm going to teach my son how to be a real man."

"Lonnie!" said Joyce.

"You have no idea what it was like growing up with him as a father, Babe," said Lonnie. "I won't put my kids through that."

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"Is grandpa sleeping?" asked Jonathan as he said next to Joyce in the pew while Lonnie shook hands with people. He really played the part of the grieving son well. Her husband was a charmer when he wanted to be one.

He had worked really hard on charming her once Hopper had left for the police academy in Indianapolis, then joined the army. He had reminded her that he had done her a huge favor when she was 15 and talked her into returning that favor in the back of his car. There was some appeal in returning that favor because Joyce knew her father wouldn't approve. It was something that didn't seem to be a

big deal to her in her early twenties, but would feel very creepy when she reflected on it later in life.

Joyce resented her own father because he cheated on her mother. Edmund Byers had always been a very kind man. It took Joyce a long time to understand why her husband resented his own father so much.

She looked at the funeral program while she kept one arm around Jonathan. "Edmund William Byers." Lonnie would never approve of the baby being named after his father, but she might be able to get away with a middle name.

"What do you think, baby? 'William' if you're a boy and Elinor after my mother if you're a girl.... Oh that's a lot of kicking. Jonathan, feel the baby kicking." Jonathan put his hand on his mother's stomach and his face lit up in delight.

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1985

"Doctor Owens wants us to destroy the tapes from November 6, 1983 and November 3, 1984."

"He's trying to protect the Byers twins.

"They are just kids that got used by Brenner and his creations."

"Those kids and the other test subjects are ticking time bombs and all those Hawkins Lab personnel that got killed were people. What about them? I'm saving copies of the tapes."

1996

Will Byers sat at his work desk with a pile of sketches for his next video game he was designing with his best friend and business partner Mike Wheeler sitting next to him while he was in an AOL chat with his other two best friends Dustin Henderson and Lucas Sinclair. They were trying to figure out where to meet to see *Independence Day* when it came out. Seeing a movie together was much more complicated than when they were kids because Mike and

Will lived near Chicago, Dustin lived in Florida and Lucas lived in Houston.

Mike was out with Will's Twin sister, who was known to the world as Jane Hopper, but to everyone in on the secret of her true Identity, she was Elinor or "El." She told plenty of people not in on the secret, that Elinor was her middle name and they could call her Ellie.

Will, Lucas, and Dustin had decided to meet in New York to see the movie when Mike and Eleven came stumbling in from the pouring early spring lane and appeared to be drunk.

"Gotta go, New York sounds great, I'll talk to you later, guys," Will typed in the chat before signing off.

"What have you two been doing? You're soaked!" said Will as he walked toward Mike and Eleven.

"We decided to try Long Island Ice Teas," Eleven hiccuped. "Then we went for a walk!"

"Yeah, we went for a walk," Mike slurred. "It's really nice out today!"

Will glanced at the torrential downpour outside of the window and shook his head. "Well, continue your walk into a hot shower before you catch a nasty cold."

Before he knew it, Will was at the center of a tight embrace with two people who were soaking wet.

"You're such a good friend, Will," said Mike. "Always looking out for us!"

"Yeah, we love you, Will," said Eleven.

Will awkwardly reached up and patted his friends on their backs. "Um, I love you both too, now get into the shower.... Uh please?"

"Ok, we'll get into the shower," said Mike. He picked up Eleven at her waist and threw her over his shoulder as she giggled.

"Don't hit your heads, you won't like having stitches!" Will called. He



held out his arms and looked down at his own clothes that had gotten soaked from the hug with his sister and his best friend. So much for wearing the clothes that April from work had recommended for the blind date she set him up on. He groaned and went to his own room to change before getting back to work on his sketches.

Mike and Eleven ended up catching nasty colds despite Will's best efforts. They'd been out drunk in the chilly rain too long and Will ended up spending the next week taking care of them. He ended up catching the cold just at they were getting better even though he'd taken extra vitamin C. Mike and Eleven gladly returned the favor of taking care of Will.

On a particularly nasty cold day when Will was hopped up on the prescription cough syrup, Joyce called.

"Hello?" Mike answered.

"Hey, Mike, it's Joyce. Are my children there? I really need to talk to both of them."

"El's right here," said Mike. "Will might be asleep. He took his cough syrup about twenty minutes ago."

There was a pause from Joyce. Mike heard her let out a slow breath. "Can you wake him up?" Normally I wouldn't ask, but it's really important."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do," said Mike. Eleven was eating eggos at the kitchen counter. Mike took to chordless over to her and held it out for her. "It's your mom and she wants to talk to Will too."

"Mom, what is it?" asked Eleven as she took the phone.

"There's something important your father and I need to tell you, but I want your brother on the phone too."

"Mom, you're scaring me," said Eleven.

"I know, and I'm sorry," said Joyce. "I just need to talk to both you and your brother." Eleven thought her mother might be crying.

Mike found Will in his room with his head on his desk instead of his pillow. Of course he was still going to try to get work done when he was sick. Mike smiled fondly and shook his head. He walked over to Will and lightly shook his shoulder. "Hey, Will the Wise, your Mom's on the phone. She said she wants to talk to you and El about something important."

Will groaned. "*Your* Mom's on the phone," he muttered. Mike decided that Will was too far out of it to have a coherent conversation with his mother.

"Okay, c'mon, buddy. Into bed!" said Mike as he reached under Will's armpits to lift him up out of the chair.

"Take a shower, Mike," Will muttered as Mike dragged him across the floor. "You're gonna catch a nasty cold."

Mike pulled off Will's sneakers and tossed them on the floor before covering Will with his blankets.

"I'll take a shower and you can get some rest," said Mike as he closed the door. Eleven was rapidly tapping on the counter as Mike came back out to the kitchen. He shook his head.

"Mom, Will's knocked out from the cough syrup." Mike watched as Eleven quietly listened to whatever Joyce was telling her before she finally responded "B-both of you?" Eleven started to cry and Mike felt a sense of foreboding. "Okay, I'll have Will call you when he wakes up."

Eleven pushed the button the end the call and cradled the phone. "El, what is it?" asked Mike. Eleven looked at him for a moment then walked into his arms and buried her face in his chest as she started sobbing.

"My parents have cancer."

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AN: Just in case it isn't obvious, Eleven is referring to Joyce and Hopper as her parents at the end, not Joyce and Lonnie.

This fic is loosely inspired by a hotly debated topic from a particular scene in my favorite MCU movie. Readers may or may not figure it out from reading this and future chapters, but I'll say which one it is and which side of the debate I personally fall on when the scene that directly references that scene comes up. Feel free to guess or discuss.

## 2. Chapter 2 Lonnie's Return

### Chapter Two

December 1996

"You're a lifesaver, Mike," said Tucker Stahl as Mike progamed his key algorithm into the final level on Tucker's latest game.

"I'm just in the Christmas spirit," said Mike as he saved the changes to a disk and handed it to Tucker. Mike had been occasionally helping Tucker tweak his games in the past few months, they had become friends, but Mike didn't want to introduce him to Will or Eleven. Tucker would often ask him to hang out and Mike usually agreed on the nights that Will was on a date with Amber and Eleven was working on a school project. Mike had learned that Tucker's father had died in Hawkins Lab on November 4, 1984.

*"I didn't know you were from Hawkins, Mike," said Tucker as he saw Mike's old yearbook on the mantle next to pictures Mike had of the trip he had taken with Eleven and Will to Mackinac Island in 1995.*

*"I'm not exactly homesick," said Mike.*

*"I'm from Snerling," said Tucker. "But my dad worked at Hawkins Lab."*

*"Oh?" asked Mike nervously as he had the urge to hide all pictures of Will and Eleven.*

*"Yeah, he was killed in that incident that caused it to be closed down in 1984. I had another friend whose father was killed the year before. Both of them had closed casket funerals. Did you ever hear about those incidents."*

*"I'm aware of them," said Mike. "I'm really sorry about your dad."*

Mike knew that Eleven and Will would both blame themselves for what had happened to Tucker's father and countless other Hawkins Lab scientists. The scientists in the 1983 incident had done a lot of horrific things while working for Brenner. Eleven may have opened the gate, but Brenner had manipulated her into doing it. Mike also

knew that it wasn't Will, but the Mind Flayer who had set up the trap in 1984. Eleven and Will weren't at fault for what they had been forced to do as a result of the MKUltra experiments and Tucker wasn't at fault for anything his father may have done.

"So you're going to that Orlando convention in February?" asked Tucker as he noticed the envelopes Mike picked up out of his mailbox.

"Yeah, it should be a lot of fun," said Mike. "I'll see you later, Tuck. Merry Christmas.

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Will sat on a bench on Navy Pier the Sunday before Christmas sketching the view of Lake Michigan. It was a place he liked to take his mother whenever she came to visit him since he'd left for college. She wasn't in any condition to be out for extended periods in the freezing cold. He visited the place once a month to draw it for her in the changing seasons.

It had been eight months since Will and Eleven has learned that their parents had been diagnosed with lung cancer. Will was glad that he'd put them both on his insurance plan when he and Mike had been hired at Hinotama games, and he was glad he'd done it. Hopper retired as Chief of Hawkins police, then he and Joyce sold their house and moved to a condo a couple miles from the house Eleven and Will shared with Mike. There was a hospital doing experimental treatments near Chicago and it seemed to be helping them.

Jonathan and Nancy were flying in from New York with their daughter Barbara that evening. Will had a little time before meeting Mike and Eleven at home. They planned on picking up their siblings and niece at O'Hare.

As Will put the final details on the sketch, he put it into a portfolio, then tucked the portfolio and the colored pencils into his satchel. He walked over to the rail and leaned on it at the cold wind stung his face. He'd always hated the cold because it reminded him of the Upside Down. One thing the Upside Down didn't have was wind. Chicago also had a large population: the opposite of the Upside

Down's emptiness. Occasionally, Chicago even had sunlight. Those things let his brain know he wasn't there.

Will jumped as someone playfully smacked his shoulder. He turned around to see his ex-girlfriend Julie Mason standing behind him. "Hey there, stranger," she said with a grin.

"Hey!" said Will as he hugged her. "What are you doing in Chicago?"

"I'm playing the Christmas concert at the Chicago theater the next couple nights," Julie answered as she leaned on the rail next to Will.

"Well, the concert should be a lot better than it has been," said Will.

"It'll be amazing," said Julie. "I could reserve a few tickets if you want. You, Mike, El and Amber. How's it going with her, by the way?"

"Good, good. She's nice. She prefers Melrose Place to X-Files, but she's nice."

"Melrose Place?" asked Julie with a wrinkled nose. "Well, nobody's perfect. How about your Mom and Hopper? My parents keep asking about them. How's their treatment going?"

"They're both having good days and bad days," said Will. "I think Mom will feel much better when Jonathan gets into town... How's um," Will snapped his fingers trying to recall the name of Julie's boyfriend as Julie watched with an amused look on her face. "Greg!"

"He's good. He met my parents at Thanksgiving, but I think you're still their favorite. Don't tell him I said that if you see him."

Will mimed a zipper across his lips. "In all fairness, I'm everyone's favorite," he said lightly. "And who came blame anyone for that?"

Julie playfully smacked Will's arm before checking her watch. "I have to get to rehearsal, but it was good seeing you and I'll reserve those tickets. Do you think Jonathan and Nancy might want to come?"

"Maybe," said Will. "I'm sure my mom would love to spend time with Barbara."

"Okay, just email me when you find out. It was great seeing you," said Julie as they hugged goodbye.

"Yeah, great seeing you too," said Will. He watched as Julie walked down the pier and got into a cab. Will winced as he thought about telling Amber about the concert. *Hey Amber, I've got tickets for a Christmas concert and my ex-girlfriend that I've never lost touch with is playing the Cello. Sounds fun.*

Amber was well aware that Will had remained friends with Julie after high school, but he hadn't told her that they had hooked up whenever they were in the same place at the same time and both single. It had been a couple years since the last time though... "Mountain out of a molehill, Byers," Will muttered to himself as he gathered his things and headed to the monorail stop.

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Eleven groaned as she looked over her research on PTSD for her thesis. She had everything she needed to finish her paper, but needed to find the research to back it up without exposing herself and her fellow MKUltra survivors. She herself was triggered by small, dark places thanks to Papa locking her in the closet as punishment. Will was triggered by cold, dark, empty places thanks to being in the Upside Down. Sara had been afraid of leaving the hospital and getting involuntary psychic visions. Kali was afraid of electrical shocks. Jane had a fear of circular patterns thanks to being pulled into her mother's dream circle. Having witnessed Terry Ives dream circle herself, Eleven understood. Her own parents had PTSD as well. Joyce had been exposed to the interdimensional shockwave when she was 14. Eleven had been taken from her at birth and Will had been taken by the demogorgan when he was 12. Then Hopper was tested on without his consent when he was in Vietnam, and the scientists had faked Sara's death, just as they had faked Jane's death and Will's death. It was all there and Eleven had the information to write an amazing paper, but she was restricted because she had to protect several people, herself included.

Eleven started to knock her forehead on the table. "You look like you could use a break."

Eleven looked up and saw Mike. She smiled, stood up, and hugged him. "I'm glad to see you. I can write this paper, but the only stuff I'm finding to back it up is written by mouthbreathers!"

Mike patted her back. "Well, it's Christmas, and you have plenty of time to finish your paper. Let's head home and meet up with Will."

"Okay," said Eleven. She gathered up her notes and stuffed them in her backpack. She envied Mike and Will for no longer continuing their education once they finished their Graduate degrees. She reminded herself that she wanted to help people with PTSD.

Mike took her backpack so he could carry it for her. She reached up, grabbed the back of his head and kissed him tenderly. They joined hands and interlaced their fingers as they walked out of the library to get on the monorail.

"How would you like to take a trip to Orlando in February, then take another trip to Vegas in April?" asked Mike as they got on the train and took their seats.

"Sounds fun," said Eleven. "Why those places at those times?"

Mike pulled a couple envelopes out of his pocket. "Will and I have been invited to participate in panels at the conventions."

"Does Will know yet?"

"I just found out when I was in the office picking up our Christmas bonus checks. I'll tell him when we get home."

"I think Will's going to be really excited," said Eleven. "He hates the cold and Orlando is really warm."

"I was thinking about inviting Dustin, Lucas and Max to meet us in Orlando. Dustin only lives about an hour away from there, not that he ever rubs it in our faces that he has warm winters, and Lucas and Max could easily hop on a plane."

"I'd love to hang out with them again," said Eleven.

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Will paid the cab driver and picked up the Sunday paper when he got out of the vehicle. As he glanced at the headlines, he noticed an old sports car parked in his driveway. A familiar and unwelcome figure was standing near his front door. "Son-of-a-bitch," Will muttered through gritted teeth. He refused to be intimidated and decided to march right up to the figure and get rid of him before Eleven got home.

"What are you doing here, Lonnie?" asked Will.

"I see you're not calling me 'Dad' anymore," Lonnie remarked.

"My Dad's name is Jim Hopper," said Will. "*What* are you doing here?"

"There's something very important I need to talk to you about, Will," said Lonnie. Will decided to hear him out and send him on his way.

"You have five minutes!" said Will as Lonnie followed him through the front door. Will took off his jacket and hat and threw them both on a chair. He then turned and faced his father as he leaned against the wall and stuff his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he glared at his father.

"I read in the papers that you and Mike are doing pretty well with those video games of yours," said Lonnie.

"So you came here for money? Some things never change, " Will remarked with a scowl.

"No! No, I didn't come here for money. I understand why you'd think that after everything I've done. It's just, you could probably afford a bigger place."

Will rolled his eyes. He pulled some cash from his wallet and tossed a couple bills at Lonnie, who made no move to pick them up. "Maybe I don't want to end up in debt up to my eyeballs like you!"

"Well, you've always been a lot smarter than I ever was," said Lonnie.

"Was that an actual compliment?" asked Will. "You must be really desperate for something. The fact that Jonathan and I are finding success doing the things you always said were a waste of time must

eat you up inside."

Lonnie rubbed his eyes with his fists. "Look, Will, you have every reason to hate me. But I am trying to help you, and I need you to listen."

"Hate isn't a strong enough word to describe how I feel about you, Lonnie."

"Will, listen! You're in danger."

"I got used to being in danger a long time ago," said Will. "And why should I believe you?"

"It's not just you, they'll be after your sister as well."

Will's eyes widened for a brief moment. "I don't have a sister for *them* to be after," said Will.

"Do you really think I didn't recognize my own daughter when I saw her at Jonathan's wedding three years ago? She looks too much like your mother at that age. She-"

Lonnie didn't get to finish his sentence as Will suddenly had him pinned against the wall. To say that Lonnie was caught off guard was an understatement. The normally gentle look in Will's eyes was replaced by pure rage.

"You stay the hell away from her, you greedy, worthless piece of shit!"

"I'm trying to help both of you," Lonnie gasped just before Will's fist collided with his face. Several more punches followed.

"YOU SOLD HER! YOU SOLD BOTH OF US, LIKE WE WERE NOTHING.!"

Will kept punching harder and harder as he said the things he'd wanted to say for over a decade. "YOU LET THEM SCREW WITH MOM'S BRAIN! YOU ALMOST LET JONATHAN DIE! "YOU STOLE MY SISTER'S CHILDHOOD! YOU-"

"WILL!"

It took Will a few seconds to realize that Eleven was calling him telepathically as he frantically glanced around the room.

*"El, stay away! Lonnie's here!"*

Will looked at Lonnie whose face was starting to swell. "Get out!" Will growled.

"Will, please! I really am trying to help and and you really are in danger."

"The last time I was really in danger, you took money when you handed me over to the very people who was putting me in danger."

"I know that Will, it's one of my biggest regrets-"

"Your five minute are up, now GET OUT!" Will grabbed an empty glass bottle, smashed it on the edge of the counter and brandished the remains at Lonnie who took the hint and left. Will sank to the floor and buried his face in his hands.

Will felt a gentle pair of hands on his shoulders after a few minutes. He looked up to see Eleven, her eyes filled with concern.

"Jesus, Will, are you okay?" asked Mike as he crouched down next to Eleven. Will shrugged. "C'mon, let's get you off that floor." Mike hoisted Will up and lead him to a chair at the kitchen table.

"Will, your hand!" said Eleven as she examined the hand he'd been using to punch Lonnie and ran her thumb across the swelling, slightly bleeding knuckles.

"I'll get some ice," said Mike. Will sat quietly staring at nothing as Mike put some ice into a towel and handed it to Eleven. She pressed it to Will's knuckles as Mike grabbed a broom and started sweeping up the broken glass.

"Sorry about that," said Will.

"Don't worry about it," said Mike.

"This is bad, this is really bad," said Will.

"It's just glass," said Mike.

"Not that. It's Lonnie, he knows."

"He knows what?" asked Eleven. Will raised his eyes to meet his sister's.

"He knows who you are, El. He said he figured it out when he saw you at Jonathan's wedding."

Mike nearly dropped the dustpan. Eleven squeezed Will's unswollen hand, then pulled him into a hug. "It's alright, Will," said Eleven. "We'll be alright."

Will squeezed Eleven's hand back and closed his eyes trying to think of what to do next.

"What do you think he wants?" asked Mike.

"He said that we're in danger and he trying to help..." said Will.

"Do you believe him?" asked Mike.

Will opened his eyes and shook his head. "He wants money, that's all he's ever wanted. Why should I believe a word he says? Every time he's said that he wants to help, he's always wanted money...*always!*"

Will untangled himself from Eleven's arms and tossed the ice into the kitchen sink before grabbing his coat and scarf.

"Where are you going?" asked Mike.

"To check on Mom and Hopper. If I know Lonnie, it's his next stop."

"We'll come with you," said Eleven.

"No! Wait here," said Will. "Lonnie isn't getting *anywhere* near you, El."

"He might not even be there. Let me at least check before you go."

"Fine!," said Will. He turned on the clock radio above the microwave then took her hand as she closed her eyes and started to focus. They both saw Lonnie getting out of his car in the driveway of Joyce and Hopper's condo. Will let go of Eleven's hand and headed for the door.

"Will, wait!" said Eleven as she grabbed his arm.

"El, he's there. I have to go."

"Just, drive carefully. It's not that far."

"I'll drive carefully, I promise."

"Good," said Eleven. "I'll know if you don't."

Will smiled.

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A cab pulled up as Will turned off his engine. He saw Jonathan and Nancy taking their suitcases out of the vehicle in the rear view mirror. Jonathan held Barbara in one arm and had a diaper bag on his other shoulder and his hand was pulling the wheeled suitcase. Nancy's arms were full too. Will glanced at the condo, then back at his brother's family unit. He got out of his car and walked briskly over to Jonathan.

"Hey, what are you guys doing here?" he asked. Jonathan looked at Will and smiled broadly.

"We got bumped to an earlier flight and thought we'd surprise everyone with an early arrival. Um, surprise!" said Jonathan. Barbara giggled and reached out to Will. He looked at Jonathan who nodded and mouthed *'please.'*

"What's going on, Will?" Jonathan asked as Will took baby Barbara. The toddler reached up and patted her uncle and the cheek and giggled even more. "You've got that look."

Will jerked his head in the direction of Lonnie's car with its Indiana license plate. "He's here. He knows about El. He tried to talk to me first and I told him in no uncertain terms-" Will held up his hand with

the bruised and slightly bleeding knuckles. They were turning red from the cold. -" to leave. Sorry your visit is starting with this."

Jonathan's expression darkened, as did Nancy's. She had never cared for Lonnie and often expressed her opinion of him more harshly than Jonathan or Will. "He's not getting anywhere near Barbara or this little one." Nancy patted her abdomen, which was just starting to swell.

"Nance, taken Barbara directly to the guest bedroom when we get inside. I'll get rid of him. Mom and Hopper are in no condition to deal with his shit!" said Jonathan. "What do you think he wants, Will?"

"He said that we're in danger and he's trying to help, but I'm pretty sure he just wants money. He's never wanted anything else when he's contacted us."

When they opened the front door, Lonnie and Joyce were in the middle of a shouting match. Hopper was leaning on the counter catching his breath. He looked really pale. Nancy and Jonathan dropped their luggage in the living room before Nancy quickly took Barbara from Will and made a beeline for the guest bedroom. Will wasn't sure of his was grateful that Sara wouldn't be in town for a couple more days or if he wished she was there already to help her father.

"Will's as unreasonable and out of control and you are, Joyce!" Lonnie shouted. "I'm trying to help and neither of you will listen!"

"You've done nothing but cause our children pain, Lonnie, why should any of us listen to you ever again?" shouted Joyce before breaking into a coughing fit that left blood on her hand.

"Mom!" Will and Jonathan both called at once. Will rushed to his mother's side and helped her into a chair while Jonathan grabbed Lonnie and shoved him against the wall.

"You're not a part of this family anymore, Lonnie," Jonathan growled as Will helped Hopper sit down as well and got Joyce and Hopper some water while Joyce grabbed a napkin and wiped the blood from

her mouth. "You never actually were."

"Like it or not, it's my blood that runs through your veins. Same with your brother, your sister, and your daughter-and I'm trying to help all of you."

"You've always done the opposite of trying to help any of us," said Jonathan. He twisted Lonnie's arm behind his back and pushed him toward the door. "Now get out and stay the hell away from all of us."

"Your daughter's in danger too. I know about her test results, Jonathan!"

Will angrily started to stand up, but two pairs of hands stopped him. Hopper and Joyce each held one of Will's arms. He didn't struggle against them out of fear of hurting them in their conditions. They both knew that. It had been ten years since his heart surgery and they still feared what could happen if Will overexerted himself too much.

"So you want to sell her to some mad scientists just like you sold Will and El?" asked Jonathan.

"Your mother is still putting crazy ideas in your head," said Lonnie angrily. Jonathan looked over to see his mother and step father holding his little brother's arms.

"I see you're still blaming Mom for your actions," said Jonathan as he pushed Lonnie toward the front door. "You are going to leave right now. I can't see the local police being too happy about you harassing a retired cop who's also a Vietnam Vet. Stay away from my brother, sister and daughter."

"When they're all in mortal danger, don't forget that I tried to warn you, you ungrateful little shit," said Lonnie right before Jonathan slammed the door in his face.

Joyce and Hopper each held onto Will's arms until Jonathan turned around and said "He's gone."

"I was almost starting to believe him," said Will as Nancy came into the kitchen carrying Barbara. "The same old Lonnie showed himself in the end." Joyce and Hopper released Will's arms. He walked over

to the stove and grabbed the teapot Eleven had gotten them at a flea market a couple months earlier and filled it with water to boil. He then turned off the coffee maker and dumped the pot of fresh coffee down the drain.

"Hey, I was about to drink that!" Hopper protested.

"And you aren't supposed to," said Will.

"I'm a grown man," said Hopper.

"Yeah," said Will. "A grown man with a chance to get better and you're gonna make the most out of that chance."

"You're becoming a real pain in the ass, kid," said Hopper as Will took a seat next to Joyce and rubbed circles on her back.

"I know and I learned how to be one from a grown man," Will retorted.

"He's got a point," said Jonathan with a grin. "Is everyone alright? Mom, he was being his usual charming self with you when we walked in."

"My first born is here a few hours early," said Joyce as she stood up and hugged Jonathan. "I'm doing great and Lonnie can't hurt us anymore."

"I think I'm going to make a few calls to see if I can find out what he's up to," said Hopper. "Just to be safe. How's your sister doing with all this, Will?"

"She's fine. She's on her way over right now," said Will.

"How do you know-?" asked Hopper. Will raised an eyebrow and tapped his own forehead.

Barbara reached over for him.

"I'll finish the tea," said Nancy as she handed to toddler to her uncle. Mike and Eleven walked in at that moment.



"Is everyone okay?" asked Mike. Nancy gave him a quick hug.

"We're fine, little brother," she said before giving Eleven a hug as well. "The asshole's gone."

"Asshole gone!" said Barbara.

"Barbara!" Jonathan exclaimed. Though he couldn't keep a straight face.

"Jerk!" said Will as he bounced Barbara on his knee. "Your mommy meant to say jerk."

"Jerk!" said Barbara.

"That's better," said Will as he tickled Barbara's tummy as she giggled.

"Good job, Bud," said Jonathan as he patted Will on the shoulder. "That never works for us."

"It's a well known fact that kids will listen to just about anyone before they listen to their own parents," said Hopper.

Eleven hugged Jonathan and Joyce before kissing Hopper on the cheek. "Parents don't always listen to their kids." She walked into the kitchen and grabbed the coffee bag from the cupboard.

"Yeah, kid, I cheated. It's Christmas," said Hopper.

"You have to have a double serving of broccoli at dinner tonight, that's the rule," said Eleven.

Mike decided to continue to lighten the mood and pulled out the envelopes from work. "We've been invited to the conventions in Orlando and Vegas." He took Barbara from Will and handed him the envelopes.

"Orlando in February? I'm there!" said Will as he read the first letter. "By the way, I got tickets to the Christmas concert at the Chicago theater tomorrow."

### 3. Chapter 3 Trip to Orlando

#### Chapter 3

February 1997

Will woke up with a small groan as the alarm clock went off the morning that he, Mike, and Eleven were taking their trip to Orlando for the gaming convention. He normally hit the snooze button several time

"Good morning, sleepy head," said Amber as she tickled his neck.

"Morning," said Will with a yawn as he kissed her and got out of bed. Luke, Will's senior, but not quite elderly car wove around his legs. Luke and Leia, the cats that Will and Eleven had adopted from the pound on Will's 15th birthday had stayed with their parents when she left for college. Their dogs, Chester and Buttons had passed away years before, but when Joyce and Hopper got sick and moved nearby, Eleven and Will took their cats back.

Amber laid on her stomach and kicked her legs playfully in the air. "I'm going to miss you this weekend, are you going to miss me?" she simpered.

"Oh course I'll miss you," said Will as he double checked his suitcase and presentation notes. "We could always get another plane ticket if you've changed your mind about coming."

"It's not really my thing," said Amber hastily. "And I already have plans with friends this weekend."

"Alright," said Will. "We have a few hours before we need to be at the airport if you change your mind," he added with a winning smile. Amber hopped off the bed and put her arms around his neck.

"You are too adorable," she said as she nibbled at his collar bone then whirled him around, pushed him back onto the bed and climbed into his lap.

"Um, the door's slightly open and Mike and El are here," said Will. He

spotted a bridal magazine on the nightstand by Amber's side of the bed. He could tell that she'd been annoyed with him the week before when he'd given her a nice necklace for Valentines Day instead of a marriage proposal with an engagement ring. Will wasn't ready for that yet and felt that Amber was feeling simply insecure because so many of her friends from high school were engaged or married.

"Don't worry, they left to check on your parents like 15 minutes ago," said Amber as she tugged at Will's tee shirt.

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"You don't mind feeding the cats this weekend?" Eleven asked Sara as they sat with Joyce, Mike, and Hopper at the breakfast table in the Hopper condo.

"Not at all," said Sara. "Just bring me back something really awesome from the convention."

"Deal," said Eleven.

"Is Amber really not going?" asked Sara.

"Of course she isn't," said Eleven bitterly. "Why would she do anything to support Will?"

"It's just not her thing," said Mike.

"Fashion conventions aren't Will's thing, but he's always gone to those stupid things when Amber asks," said Eleven.

"I know," said Mike. "But Amber's...nice..."

"Sure, she's nice," said Sara as she took a sip of tea. "And she wants everyone to *know* how nice she is. And *talk* about it. Like when she made a big deal about how she didn't *mind* that he had a scar on his chest from his surgery."

"Or how she was *generous* to *let* him spend Christmas with his sick parents," Eleven added.

"C'mon, girls," said Hopper as he looked up from the paper. His eyes

twinkled. "You're never going to think anyone is good enough for your brother."

"No one is," said Eleven. "I just think Amber only likes Will because he's nice."

"She thinks pretty highly of herself too," said Sara. "At Christmas, El and I overheard her talking to a friend on the phone. She was worried about Will taking her to a concert where Julie was in the Orchestra, but she said she stopped worrying when she saw her."

"Amber thinks she's way prettier than Julie," said Eleven.

"I supposed if attractiveness is measured by how much makeup you wear, she's got a point," said Sara.

"Yeah, she got mad at Will last week when she told me I'd be so much prettier if I got contacts and wore more makeup," said Eleven. "She tried to get Will to tell me that too and he said I should do whatever makes me comfortable. She started yelling at him and saying that he should have backed her up."

"What?" asked Joyce. "Honey, you're beautiful the way you are. And who does she think she is yelling at my Will like that?"

"That's what I said," said Eleven. "Will's too nice to say anything. I'm afraid she'll trap him or something."

"She won't," said Mike.

"How do you know that?" asked Eleven.

"She's been leaving heavy hints that she wan't Will to propose and he isn't budging," said Mike. "Will's non-confrontational, but he isn't a pushover."

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Mike had been scared of heights since the say he jumped off a cliff to save Dustin from getting his teeth cut out by Troy. He always took the aisle seat when they flew. Eleven liked to look out the window and see the clouds from above, but she always insisted that Will take

the window seat if he was with them. Will had a photographic memory and he would draw the clouds after the flight. Eleven loved her brother's drawings.

"Amber should have come to support you," said Eleven to Will. Mike occupied himself with a magazine.

"She had things to do this weekend and video games aren't her thing," said Will with a shrug.

"Then why are you even dating her?" asked Eleven.

"Couples don't have to like all the same things, El."

"Oh course they don't, but you always support her and she never supports you."

"That's not true. She's understanding when I need to help Mom and Hopper."

"She just wants to be praised for being understanding, there's a difference," said Eleven. Will rolled his eyes and pulled out his walkman. Jonathan had sent him another mixtape with a lot of seattle bands and the groups they inspired.

"I really don't feel like having this same old argument. You may not like Amber, but she is my girlfriend and I'm a grown adult now."

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The Orlando airport was filled with people taking a break from the chilly winter weather in the northern states. Will sat on a bench working on the outline for his novel while Eleven and Mike went to check on shuttles to the hotel.

"Byers!" Will looked up to see Lucas and Max approaching him.

"Lucas, Max!" Will called as he waved to them. "Hey!" He hugged Lucas, then Max.

"Where are the other two Musketeers?" asked Max.

"Checking on shuttles to the hotel," Will answered.

"Thanks for inviting us," said Max. "I think I'll be in Heaven with all the gaming this weekend."

"I'm sure you'll win that Dig Dug tournament," said Will with a grin.

"Dustin'll try really hard though," said Lucas.

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"It's much cuter and way less gross than a baby demogorgan," said Max as she looked at the small gecko Dustin had brought.

"It's a *Correlophus ciliatus*," said Dustin. "They were thought to be extinct until 1994, but we found them on an exhibition. I'm writing my thesis on species thought to be extinct."

"I can't wait to read it," Will called from the table as he and Mike looked over their schedule. The party was relaxing in the hotel room.

"How are you managing to do post graduate work and raise two kids?...and keep all those lizards?" asked Lucas.

"Because I'm awesome," said Dustin.

"And Steve Harrington is watching them this weekend?" asked Lucas.

"He has a gift for babysitting," said Dustin.

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Tucker stared in disbelief at the video footage. Mike Wheeler was right there in Hawkins Lab the night his father was killed. His friend Will Byers had called the creatures that killed most of the people in the lab. The same Will Byers that Mike had always avoided introducing to Tucker. Tucker had confided in Mike. Mike had known the truth the whole time and said nothing.

"Are you in?" Dex asked Tucker.

"I'm in," said Tucker.

"Great," said Dex. "After all these years, the Byers twins and all the other abominations will pay for their crimes. We'll need you to get Mike Wheeler here." Dex pointed to the building blueprints.

"I can do that," said Tucker. "But he isn't one of them. Let's give him a chance to work with us."

"We'll give him a chance," said Dex. "But if he refuses to cooperate..."

## 4. Chapter Revenge plot

### Chapter Four

Will stretched across the bed in his hotel room on his stomach flipping through the convention program. He and Mike had just finished speaking on a panel an hour earlier and had another one the next day. He'd had a stomach full of butterflies that got very active just before he'd gone on stage. He'd gotten better about stage fright since he was a kid, but still had issues. At that moment, he was just winding down while his friends got ready to see the special edition of *Empire Strikes Back* in the theater. They weren't actually going to dress up. Though they didn't say it out loud, it was obvious that Will would go as Luke and Dustin would go as Chewbacca (due to his amazing impersonation). The group knew (but didn't say out loud) that Lucas and Mike would end up arguing over who got to be Han. Even though Dustin was the wise cracker of the group, Lucas and Mike always wanted to cosplay as the wisecracking fictional characters.

It was going to be just the four of them. Will had the sneaking suspicion that they had all asked their significant others not to come because Amber hadn't come with Will and they didn't want him to feel left out. "Are you guys sure you don't want El, Max or Cathy to come with us?" Will asked as he sat up.

"Given that this is *Empire* and not just any Star Wars movie, it's imperative that it's just the four of us," said Dustin. "After all, seeing that amazing movie is the first thing the four of us did together as a group."

"That's true," said Lucas. "That experience made the party what it is today."

Dustin sat down next to Will, slung one arm around him and pulled him into a bear hug. "Thank goodness this reckless little rascal hit his head on the monkey bars or someone else may have been called to the office my first day at Hawkins Elementary."

"I felt really compelled to get up on those monkey bars that morning,"



said Will with a grin. "It was fate."

"It really was," said Dustin.

"Are you guys ready to go yet? I wanna get good seats," said Lucas.

"We've been waiting on you, asshole," said Dustin playfully. The four original party members headed to the theater.

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"The guy with the black hair is Mike Wheeler and the guy with the dark brown hair that isn't curly is Will Byers," said Dex to the two men standing with himself and Tucker. They kept themselves out of the view of the long line of fans waiting to see Empire Strikes Back. Will and Mike were having an animated conversation with Lucas and Dustin.

"Where's Jane Hopper?" asked one of the men. "I've heard that she's inseparable from her brother and boyfriend."

"She's with Max Mayfield at that gaming tournament. She apparently has a telepathic connection with her brother, so once we have Byers and Wheeler, she won't be far behind," said Dex.

"We aren't going hurt Mike though, right?" asked Tucker. "He's not one of them."

"We'll give him a chance to cooperate," said Dex.

"What about little Barbara Byers?" asked one of the men.

"I've got contacts in New York. They'll get her here tomorrow afternoon."

"Barbara Byers?" asked Tucker. "That's Mike's niece. She's just a baby."

"A baby who will grow up to be just like her aunt and uncle," said Dex. "More people will end up dead, just like our fathers. And for what? Abominations, that's what they all are."

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"Well?" asked Nancy as Jonathan held the door to the cab open for her. Jonathan had just gotten out of a Saturday morning meeting and he was taking Nancy to lunch.

"They want me to direct a produce an full length documentary," said Jonathan. "I never thought I'd be doing that."

"Well, you do seem to love moving pictures as much as still shots," said Nancy as she gave him a kiss and the cab started pulling away from the curb into the Manhattan traffic. "This is amazing! Are you going to call Will and El? They'll be thrilled for you."

"Maybe later tonight. They're probably pretty busy at that convention and cell phone reception is terrible in those places."

Nancy and Jonathan didn't notice a man watching them as they got into the cab. Why would they? They were in the busiest city in the country. He nodded to two other men across the street. "Let's do this!" he said as they crossed the street to him.

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Heather Fowler sat on the sofa reading a book about Elmo to little Barbara Byers. As toddlers went, she was very easy to look after. She had a tickle-me Elmo and an ABC Elmo that she never wanted to put down. Heather was relieved that she wasn't constantly pushing on their stomachs. There was a knock at the door within minutes of Nancy Byers heading downstairs to meet her husband for lunch. Heather's gut told her not to answer it. She would soon regret not listening to that gut.

Heather got up and put Barbara into her playpen, then opened the door just enough so she could peer out. Three men she didn't recognize stood in the hallway.

"Can I help you?" asked Heather.

"Are Mr. and Mrs Byers home?" asked one of the men.

"Who wants to know?" asked Heather.

"We already know the answer," said one of the men. He suddenly kicked the door hard enough to snap the chain latch. It hit Heather in the face and knocked her to the floor. She was too dizzy to stand back up, but heard the men say something about taking Barbara to Florida before she passed out.

"I don't see why we don't just take out this little brat now," said one of the men as another gave a screaming Barbara an injection that knocked her out.

"Dex wants her aunt and uncle to watch her go before he takes them out," said another man.

"C'mon," said the third man. "We gotta get to the airport before her parents know she's missing."

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"Where's your medication?" Sara asked Hopper and Joyce as they sat down to a late lunch.

"Cabinet above the microwave," said Hopper. Sara went over to the cabinet and grabbed the new prescription bottle they'd picked up when they went to the grocery store earlier that day.

"Sara, honey, are you alright?" asked Joyce as she noticed that Sara was standing completely still. Hopper looked up to see Sara frozen in place.

"Sara, what is it?" asked Hopper. Sara squeezed her father's prescription, she then reached up and grabbed Joyce's refill and closed her eyes for a few seconds before suddenly throwing both bottles into the garbage.

"Someone's trying to poison both of you," said Sara.

"Rita wasn't working at the pharmacy today," said Joyce. "I didn't recognize the new person."

"I have to call Will and Eleven," said Sara as she picked up the phone.

"We don't need to worry them yet," said Joyce. "We should call the

police."

"We have to get a hold of them, I think whoever tried to poison you is after them. I think they want revenge," said Sara.

"What makes you think that?" asked Hopper.

"I don't know, I just have a gut feeling. I saw something about Hawkins Lab," said Sara.

Joyce's hand started to tremble as she held it to her mouth. She herself always had accurate gut feelings, so Sara as an actual psychic must have had even better ones. "This can't be happening, not again," said Joyce as she started to cry. "I can't lose them." It had been over a decade since her children had been in mortal danger. Joyce had hoped that it was all behind them.

Hopper put his arm around Joyce as Sara dialed Will's cell phone number. Nothing! She tried Eleven. Still nothing. Mike: no answer. Joyce picked up Will's note with the Hotel and convention center number and handed it to Sara. Just then the phone rang Sara answered hoping that it was one of the people she'd been trying to contact.

"Hello? Will?"

"No, it's Jonathan. Have you been trying to get a hold of Will, Sara? I can't reach him, Mike, or Eleven. The people at the Hotel keep saying the lines are busy in the rooms and won't send anyone to check on them. Nancy's trying to get a hold of the Orlando police."

"Why are you trying to get a hold of them?" asked Sara.

"Are my parents with you?" asked Jonathan.

"Yes. Someone tried to poison them. I saw something when I picked up their `prescription bottles."

Jonathan was silent for a few moments. "Okay, listen Sara. I need you to stay calm. Don't tell my parents, but ... Barbara's been kidnapped. Our babysitter thinks she heard them say something about Florida. We contacted JFK and someone took a private plane to Orlando.

Barbara was seen on some security footage. We've been trying to contact Will, Mike and Eleven."

"I see," said Sara. Her father and step mother looked at her waiting for answers.

"I need you to stay with Mom and Hopper," said Jonathan. "Whoever tried to poison them might try something else. I'm taking the next flight to Orlando."

"Okay," said Sara. "I'll make some calls and get some help."

"What's going on?" asked Joyce.

"I need to make a couple phone calls," said Sara.

"Lonnie!" said Joyce.

"Lonnie?" asked Hopper.

"He said he was trying to warn us about something when he came here before Christmas. What if he was telling the truth?"

"Do you have his number?" asked Hopper.

"I've had no desire or reason to contact him for a long time," said Joyce.

"I'll called the Indianapolis police. They should be able to find him," said Hopper. Sara handed him the phone, then grabbed her cell phone and address book out of her purse.

"Kali? It's Sara."

"Sara Hopper?" asked Kali. "I haven't heard from you in a while."

"Can you and Jane get to Orlando? El and Will are in danger."

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Will checked his watch. He'd been talking to Amber (mostly listening to her talk as she had little interest in hearing about the panel's Will and Mike had promoted their games on). Will focused on the bags of

X-Files and D&D merchandise he'd purchased earlier that afternoon as Amber talked about the bridal expo she'd gone to with her friend Steph. He thought about the preview of the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* he'd seen because El and Max were curious. He and Mike were skeptical about any show based on a movie and vice versa, but they both had to admit it looked pretty interesting.

His mind was wandering too much as Amber talked about different dress designers and wedding venues. He didn't want to be one of \*those\* guys: the guys who looks down their noses at the things their girlfriends liked.

There was a knock at the door. "Hold that thought, Amber, someone's at the door."

"Could they knock any louder?" asked Amber.

"Probably," said Will. He set the phone down on the night stand, got up to answer the door.

"Oh, good, you're alive," said Mike with a grin.

"Yeah, it's a miracle. What's up?" asked Will.

"Someone just asked if we could participate in another panel tomorrow. They're having a prep session in 45 minutes and want us there. You interested?"

"Sure, why not?" said Will.

"Alright, let's go," said Mike.

"Just a second," said Will. He went back over to his nightstand and picked up the phone. "Amber, Mike and I have a meeting, I'll call you later."

"Okay. I miss you," said Amber in a sing songy voice. "Tell me you miss me too,"

"I miss you," said Will. "I'll see you Monday morning."

"We should have brought our pagers," said Mike. "I can't get a signal

on my phone in this place."

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"Okay, this place is empty and it looks like it's still under construction," said Will and he and Mike entered the building after the shuttle dropped them off. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

Mike looked at the piece of paper he'd been given by the man who had invited him to be on the panel.

"This is the right place." Mike and Will looked up to see Tucker approaching them.

"Tucker?" said Mike. "You're on this Panel too?"

"Yeah," said Tucker. "Pretty cool, huh?" He looked at Will. There was something stiff and phony about his smile. It made Will feel uneasy. He didn't want to be rude and told himself the he was imagining things.

"You must be Will Byers," said Tucker as he held out his hand. Will thought he saw Mike shifting uneasily out of the corner of his eye. He shook Tucker's hand. The guy had a tight grip.

"Will, this is Tucker Stahl. He works in strategy development," said Mike.

"Oh," said Will. "Hey, how's it going, Tucker?"

"Great," said Tucker. His voice sounded friendly, but it looked like he was straining to smile. "But we're late for the meeting. Follow me."

"Why are we meeting in some building that's under construction?" asked Mike as they followed Tucker to an Elevator and got in. Tucker pushed the button to the third floor.

"There's just a huge reveal that they want to keep secret," said Tucker.

When the elevator stopped on the third floor, Tucker put his hand on Mike's arm as Will stepped out. "I have to show you something really

quick, Mike." Will turned around to see why the other two men weren't following. Suddenly, someone hit him from a folding chair from behind and he fell to the ground and out of Mike's view.

"Will!" Mike shouted.

"Mike, wait," said Tucker as he grabbed Mike's arm. Mike threw him off as the attacker stepped into the door frame as the doors started to close. Mike charged at him and shoved him to the ground. He turned around to see Will starting to push himself off the floor and rushed to his friend's side. The doors to the Elevator closed while Tucker was still inside.

Will's attacker was starting to pick himself up off the ground and two other men were approaching from down the hallway. "Will, can you walk?" asked Mike.

"Looks like I don't have a choice," said Will. Mike put his arms around Will and helped him to his feet. "Run!"

Mike could tell that Will was in pain, but they both ran as fast as they could. There was a construction shelf with paint supplies. Mike stopped and knocked it over. Will grabbed his arm and pulled him into a doorway. He put his finger to his lips and closed his eyes. Mike saw Will disappear, but could still feel his friend's hand on his upper arm. Mike realized that he couldn't see his own upper arm. Will tugged Mike's arm and they quietly tip-toed down the hall as they heard their attackers trying to clear the improvised barricade.

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Cathy and Max quickly realized that Eleven was no longer walking at their side as they headed to Wonder Woman booth. They looked back to see her standing completely still and staring at nothing.

"El, are you alright?" asked Max as she and Cathy turned and ran back to Eleven. Eleven put her hand on Max's shoulder and leaned on her for support.

"Someone has Mike and Will trapped in that building a couple blocks away," Eleven whispered to Max. "They attacked Will. I have to go



help."

"Want me to call the police?" asked Max.

"Not the police," said Eleven. "Contact my Dad's friends."

"What? I don't under-" Max didn't get the chance to finish her question as Eleven took off and disappeared into the crowd.

"What's going on?" asked a dumbfounded Cathy.

"I don't know," said Max as she looked at her cell phone. "Can you get a signal in here?"

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"No sign of Lonnie?" asked Joyce as Hopper hung up the phone. He shook his head.

"My buddies are checking around, but so far no one's seen him since yesterday morning.

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Will found a door to a stairway. There wasn't any sign that the men chasing them were nearby, so he opened the door and lead Mike through it.

They became visible again when the door closed. Mike saw that Will's nose and left ear were both bleeding. "We have to keep moving," said Will. He took a step down the stairs and lost his balance. Fortunately, Mike had great reflexes and caught him. He put his arm around Will to support him and they made it to the landing between the floors.

"Catch your breath," said Mike.

"There's no time for that, El's on her way," said Will.

"Shit!" said Mike.

"There you are, I've been looking all over for you two." Mike and Will looked down to see Tucker walking up to the second floor.

"Tucker are you alright?" asked Mike as Tucker walked up to the landing where Mike and Will stood. Will leaned against the wall and slid to the floor. He wanted to get out of the building before Eleven got there and put herself in danger, but his head was spinning too much from keeping himself and Mike invisible for so long and answering his sister's telepathy.

Mike noticed that something seemed off about Tucker and it was making him very uneasy. Tucker had lead them to the third floor where Will was ambushed...

"I'm about to be more alright than I've been since November 4, 1984," said Tucker. He pulled out a gun and pointed it at Will.

"No!" Mike yelled in a panicked voice as he stepped in front of Will..

"Move, Mike," said Tucker. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You just want to shoot my best friend," said Mike angrily. "That's not going to happen."

"I thought \*I\* was your friend," said Tucker. "You knew my father was killed when that abomination-" Tucker indicated Will. "Set all those creatures loose on the lab. You've known all this time that your buddy here was responsible and you've said nothing. You've known all this time that the abomination you call your girlfriend set something loose the year before causing a lot of deaths and you've said nothing. If you really were my friend, Mike, you'd let me get justice for my father."

"Fuck you, Tucker!" Mike spat. "Those scientist that got killed in 1983, they kidnapped my girlfriend when she was born and experimented on her. They used her to open the gate that let the monster out. It was a monster, by the way that they created. They also created the shadow monster that possessed Will and used him to let all those other monsters in the lab that killed your father. I'm sorry that he got caught up in all that, but none of it was Will's fault." Mike glanced at Will. "None of it was your fault, Will." Will looked back up at Mike with that frightened-pained expression that Mike hadn't seen in over a decade.

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Max and Cathy ran out to the lobby of the convention center. Max wasn't sure whether to ask for help at the concierge or go to their hotel room. Lucas and Dustin were going over their Yu-Gi-Oh! trading cards.

"Max!" Max turned around to see Kali standing near the entrance of the building with Jane Ives.

"Kali!" Max called. She ran over to the woman she hadn't seen in years. Cathy closely followed her. Max lowered her voice. "Am I glad to see you! Mike and Will are in trouble. El went to rescue them. I think she needs help."

"Dammit!" said Jane. "She was moving too fast. I knew she'd be gone by the time we got here."

"Are you charged up enough to find her again?" asked Kali.

"Maybe, but it's too noisy in here," said Jane.

Kali spoke into a device on her wrist. "The sparrow has flown. We're going to try to locate her again. Get somewhere safe," Kali added to Max and a very confused Cathy. She had learned a lot of the story behind everything from Dustin after they'd gotten married, just not the \*whole\* story.

"We'll try in the van," said Kali to Jane as they left the building. "Look for Will this time. Wherever he is, that's where El's going."

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"See, Tucker, I told you Mike couldn't be reasoned with," said Dex as he came down from the third floor followed by two other men. "I told you he'll always protect them. He isn't your friend and he never was."

Tucker pointed his gun at Will again and Mike remained motionless.

"Wait a minute, Tucker, that wasn't the plan. We have to make the Byers twins feel the pain that we felt.

"What do you mean make them suffer?" asked Mike. Dex looked at his watch.

"Oh you're mother and step father had their prescription refills switched with an \*alternative\*, about four hours ago\*" Dex said as he looked at Will. "They should be choking on their own vomit right about now."

Eleven had just entered the stairway from the first floor. She quickly ducked to the side, closed her eyes and focused on her parents. She saw them sitting at the kitchen table with Sara, who was holding one of the prescription containers. Eleven quietly sighed with relief and was grateful that her step sister was taking care of her parents.

"You son of a bitch!" said Will through gritted teeth. "Why? They didn't do anything."

"Your mother gave birth to you and your step father helped protect you and your sister all these years, even though he knew exactly what you are," said Dex. "Don't worry, though. We didn't stop at your parents. We have your niece right here in this building." Mike and Will exchanged a frightened look. "We can't let that little brat grow up and become whatever it is she'll become. We're not monsters though, she'll be with family when she dies. Put that gun down, Tucker."

"Let me just finish him," said Tucker angrily. "The sister can watch when you take out their niece. Move Mike."

"That's not going to happen, Tucker. Ever!" said Mike. Tucker suddenly pointed the gun at Mike's arm and squeezed the trigger. Eleven reacted as quickly as she could, but the bullet still grazed the side of Mike's arm. He grabbed it and doubled over in pain.

Eleven let out a roar of anger and Tucker, Dex and the two men with them were levitated in the air and knocked against the wall. They all fell to the ground unconscious.

"Mike! Will!" Eleven called as she ran up the stairs to her boyfriend and her brother.

"El!" they both called.

"Mike, are you alright?" asked Will.

"Am *I* alright?" asked Mike. "Are *you* alright? You got hit over the back with a folding chair and kept us invisible all that time."

"Well you just got shot and you're bleeding!" said Will as Eleven reached the landing and knelt beside them.

"It only grazed me, I'll be fine," said Mike. As he stood up and Eleven helped Will to his feet.

"We have to find Barbara," said Will to Eleven. He pulled out his cell phone and pushed the star button to bring up a dial tone. Eleven closed her eyes and focused.

"I found her," said Eleven. "She's not far." Eleven glanced at Mike's bleeding arm and exchanged a meaningful look with Will. They were silent for a few seconds and Will nodded.

"Lucas and Dustin are playing with their new Yu-Gi-Oh! cards in Lucas' hotel room, right Mike?" asked Will.

"They were before I fell for this stupid trap and came to find you," said Mike. Will nodded. He suddenly turned and put his hands on the wall. His body trembled as energy pulsed through it and a portal opened up to reveal Dustin and Lucas sitting at a table going through their new trading cards. Mike suddenly felt himself being levitated and he was floating through the portal.

"What the-" said Dustin as Mike gently landed on the floor. Mike looked up to see Will and Eleven watching him through the portal. He jumped to his feet as he saw it start to shrink.

"No!" Mike shouted as he ran to the portal. It vanished and was replaced by a solid wall.

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Couple of notes in anticipation for possible questions: First, Amber isn't part of the conspiracy to kill Will, Eleven and Barbara. She just

wants to get married because most of her friends are getting married.

Why did Eleven see Sara holding the prescription container when she'd thrown it in the trash? Sara fished it out of the trash because they're going to hand it over to a crime lab for analysis.

Why did Tucker shoot Mike in the arm? He'd just trying to get him out of the way and doesn't want to kill him.

Why didn't Will and Eleven send Mike through a portal to the hospital? Simple, because they were opening a friggin' portal and didn't want to open it to a public place.

How did Kali and Jane get to Orlando so fast? How did Dex's co-conspirators get there so fast with a kidnapped toddler? Kali and Jane do some specialized work rooting out people who do unethical things so they're really connected. Dex and his cronies are the kids of some seriously corrupt scientists who worked in Hawkins Lab until Eleven escaped and Will got trapped in the Upside Down. They are also really connected. They took a private plane from New York to Orlando. Dex had people at the hotel and convention center stopping calls from reaching the party members. I tried to write scenes, but they were garbage.

The main Debate surrounding my favorite MCU movie Captain America: Civil War inspired this fic and it built from the moment where Tucker is trying to get revenge on Will. I've actually read people saying that Steve should have just stepped aside and let Tony kill Bucky. When I watched the second season on Stranger Things and saw what happened when Will was possessed and being used by the Mind Flayer. It reminded me of Bucky being used by HYDRA. It also pinpointed why I was annoyed when people said that Cap was acting selfishly when he was protecting Bucky. I can't imagine Mike just stepping aside and letting a kid of one of the Hawkins lab scientist take revenge on Will for something that Will, like Bucky had no control over. Team Cap all the way, especially when Tony couldn't let his grudge go even when the Universe was at stake in Infinity War.

## 5. Chapter 5 Reconcile?

### Chapter 5

"Ok, what just happened?" asked Dustin as Mike slid hopelessly down the wall and rested his forehead on it.

"Mike, are you alright?" asked Lucas. Mike shook his head.

"Will, El and Barbara, they're all in danger," said Mike.

"Barbara?" asked Lucas.

"There's a group of people whose parents were killed in Hawkins Lab in '83 and '84," said Mike as Lucas helped him to his feet. They blame Will and El. They kidnapped Barbara because...because they don't want her to grow up."

"WHAT?" Dustin exclaimed. "Oh, shit! What do we do?"

Before Mike could answer, Max opened the door to the room. She was followed by Cathy- who went directly to Dustin and hugged his- and Jonathan. "Mike, thank God you're alright! Where's Will?" What happened to your arm?"

"Will and El just sent me through a portal to this room right after I got shot." Mike glanced at the graze on his arm. "-sorta shot."

"We should probably get that cleaned up," said Lucas.

"There's no time for that," said Mike. "They have Barbara. Those psychos want to kill her, Will and El."

"Do you know where they are, Mike?" asked Jonathan. Mike nodded.

"There's a building that's under construction a few blocks away." Mike pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket that had the address. "They said they wanted us to be part of a panel tomorrow. We should have known something was wrong when the building was empty. Will was attacked and he used his invisibility to help us escape. Then my friend- at least I used to think he was my friend- Tucker wanted me

to just stand aside so he could shoot Will."

"Is that what happened to your arm?" asked Jonathan. Mike nodded. Jonathan felt a renewed sense of affection for his brother-in-law. He'd always been grateful that Mike was Will's friend. "Luckily El showed up and went all-well El- and the guys surrounding us. She said she was able to locate Barbara, but then she and Will sent me here. Now they're in a building full of the kids of Hawkins Lab agents that want to see them dead."

"They aren't alone," said Max.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"I was just telling Jonathan that Kali and Jane are here. They were looking for El. I'm sure Jane found her. We came here to see if Lucas or Dustin had spoken to you because I didn't know where El went, just that she was looking for you and Will."

Mike let out a small sigh of relief. "Okay, so they aren't alone. I still don't want to wait here and do nothing."

"Me either," said Jonathan. "Let's get that arm of your cleaned up before we go. A bloody arm is going to attract the sort of unwanted attention that'll slow us down."

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Will and Eleven took a moment to catch their breath as they wiped blood from their noses. Aside from telepathy with each other, they hadn't used their powers on a regular basis in years other than Will redirecting sunlight to help plants grow.

Eleven noticed that Will had bruises on the back of his neck and his head was bleeding from where he's been hit with the folding chair. He was also pale from the effort of keeping himself and Mike invisible for several minutes as well as making a portal back to the hotel. He hadn't created any portals since 1985, and even at that point, he'd gotten almost no practice. He'd occasionally used his invisibility for a little fun, but it still caused strain on him.

The terror she'd felt the day Will had his surgery came rushing back



to Eleven. "I should have sent you back with Mike, you're hurt, Will."

"There was no way I was going to leave you here alone with a building full of psychos who want to kill us, El," said Will. "We said we'd always protect each other, remember? Now, let's go save our niece and get out of here before Mike comes back and put himself in danger again. Jonathan's probably on his way too."

Eleven pointed to the door to the second floor and jerked her head. Will followed her. She couldn't help but feel concerned as he walked stiffly beside her. She knew he was in pain, but decided to focus on finding Barbara. She was tempted to run, but knew that other people working with Tucker and Dex could be anywhere. She was too drained to focus on trying to find that many people.

Eleven was able to focus on finding Barbara pretty well. She loved her niece and still hated Papa and the people he worked with for doing everything they did to her for almost 13 years. She felt angry for Sara, Jane, Kali, and the others. She was furious that Agent's children now wanted to murder Will and Barbara. Papa and his group had killed Benny and several other innocent people.

Eleven stopped at a door and Will stopped with her. She held her finger to her lips and closed her eyes. She saw two men in the room with Barbara. The toddler was breathing heavily and looking frightened. There were tear tracks on her cheeks. Eleven opened her eyes and looked around.

"There's two men in there with her," she said to Will, who nodded. "She's in the corner to the right of the door. I'll disarm the men, you grab Barbara. She's scared, Will. We have to try to keep her calm while we get out of here."

"I can make another portal once we have her," said Will. Eleven looked at her brother and bit her lip. She was afraid that trying to make another portal could really cause him some damage. What if surgery couldn't fix it this time? They had to get Barbara to safety though and he didn't need to get them anywhere that was too far away, she Eleven merely nodded.

They quietly entered the room. One of the men noticed Eleven and

Will and started to shout a warning to the other when he suddenly couldn't move. The other man was frozen in place as well. Eleven levitated both of them. "Will, now!" she shouted.

Will rushed to Barbara and scooped her up, pulling her into a hug. Both men that Eleven was suspending in the air lost consciousness and she lowered them to the floor.

Barbara clung to Will's neck as tears rolled down her cheek. "Ssshh! It's alright, little one. We're getting out of here. El, take her while I make the portal."

Eleven shook her head. It's not safe, Will. You could hurt your heart. We have to get out the normal way."

"Maybe, it could hurt my heart," said Will. "But this building is full over psychos who want to kill all three of us."

"Psycho isn't a very nice word," said Dex as he entered entered the room followed by Tucker and about seven other people including Lonnie whose hands were bound. "We're just a group of people who want justice for our murdered parents."

"Your parents stole from my mother when I was born and experimented on me for almost 13 years," said Eleven.

"Stole?" said Dex. "They paid your father here some good money for you, then for your brother. We thought he understood what you were, but Lonnie here is having a little seller's remorse. We tried to offer him some more money a few months back, but he had to go and try to warn you about us. He was going to try to warn you again before you came to Orlando, but we couldn't let that happen. We decided to let him witness the final moments of his spawn he's suddenly decided to care about after all these years."

Dex untied Lonnie and shoved him to the side of the room where his children stood. Will was in shock and internally beating himself for not hearing Lonnie out before Christmas.

"Leave them alone," said Lonnie. "You know what happened to your parents wasn't their fault. If your parents worked with Brenner, they

were murderers."

"Tell you what, old man," said Dex. "You can watch them all die before you join them." Dex pointed his gun at Will and Barbara. "Now, hand me the kid, Byers."

"That's not going to happen," said Will as he turned to the side to shield Barbara. He took a few steps back, stumbled and lost his balance. He fell against the wall and slid to the floor.

"WILL!" Eleven screamed and rushed to his side, Will continued to clutch Barbara protectively.

"I'm fine," said Will.

Tucker let out an angry grunt as he pulled out his gun and pointed it at Will.

"Not yet, Tucker," said Dex. "We're sticking to the plan. They need to suffer."

"She'll suffer if she watches her brother die," said Tucker. "I've waited long enough." He put his finger on the trigger.

"Tucker, not yet," Dex repeated. Tucker glared at him. It all happened very fast. Eleven jerked her head to remove the guns from their captures. There was a split second too late to stop Tucker from firing his gun.

"No!" Lonnie shouted. He threw himself in front of the bullet. It hit him in the abdomen and he collapsed to the floor as Eleven screamed. Dex, Tucker, and the others started to scramble to look for their guns. They all suddenly stopped, covered their heads and curled up on the floor. Their guns slid across the floor toward the door.

Will and Eleven looked up to see Kali and Jane followed by a group of agents in S.W.A.T. jackets. Both of their noses were bleeding.

"Get some restraints on these people," said Kali to the agents. "I can't hold this illusion much longer."

Eleven crawled over to Lonnie and turned him on his back. There was

no exit would, so Eleven hoped it would slow the blood loss. Will stared in shock for a moment, then looked up at Kali.

"He needs a doctor."

"We'll have to get an ambulance," said Kali. "Or at least find something to carry him on so he doesn't lose too much blood. Wait here, for a minute. There are still more people in this building who want you dead."

Kali nodded at a couple agents who stood guard at the door. "I'm calling an ambulance. We'll be back as soon as we've captured everyone and you're safe."

Agents escorted Dex, Tucker and the others out of the room to keep them away from Will, Eleven, and Barbara.

Eleven held out her hand and the bullet came out of Lonnie's wound before it began to close. Fresh blood started to trickle from her nose. Will looked from Lonnie to Eleven. Eleven sat on the floor as she caught her breath.

"Here, take Barbara for a second." He handed Barbara to Eleven. Will then went over to the wall and put his hands on the wall. He body trembled violently, but nothing happened. "DAMMIT!" Will shouted as he slapped the wall with both of his hands. "Hey!" He shouted at the agents guarding the door. "Where's the nearest hospital. He doesn't have much time."

"You need to relax, kid," said the first agent. "You'll expose yourself and your sister if you open a portal into a public place like a hospital and you don't look like you have the strength at the moment anyway. The ambulance is on it's way."

"It won't get here in time," Will protested.

"Will, please," said Eleven as she walked over to him and grabbed his arm. "Please relax."

"I can't relax, he's dying," said Will as he indicated Lonnie.

"Will," Lonnie croaked weakly. "Listen to your sister."

Eleven handed Barbara back to Will and lead him back to where Lonnie was lying on the floor. Will leaned against the wall and began to rub comforting circles on his niece's back. Eleven sat next to Lonnie and took his hand. She glanced back at Will who merely shrugged and stared at the door frame.

"You're so beautiful," said Lonnie to Eleven. "You look a lot like your mother."

"You could have seen her grow up if you hadn't been such a shitty father, husband, and all around shitty person," said Will angrily. He didn't want Lonnie to die, but still felt like Lonnie had no right to talk to Eleven or talk *about* Joyce.

"Will!" said Eleven sharply.

"It's alright," said Lonnie. "Will has every reason and every right to hate me. So do you."

"We don't hate you," said Eleven.

"I do," said Will. He took a deep breath and caressed Barbara's cheek. "But I still should have listened to you when you tried to warn us. It's my fault we're all here."

"No, Will. It isn't your fault. I should have been the adult. I should have been more patient with you and your mother. You may have listened to me if I wasn't being a complete jerk in that moment and didn't have a long history of scams and lies. This is on me, not you."

"It's on the people who tried to kill us," said Eleven.

"You know, your mother did hold you when you were born," said Lonnie to Eleven. Will looked up sharply. No one had known for certain what had happened in the fourteen hour blackout Joyce experienced when she was in labor with Eleven and Will. It had never occurred to any of them that Lonnie had been there when Eleven was born.

"S-she did?" asked Eleven.

"Yes," said Lonnie. "They had drugged her pretty heavily, but decided

to let her hold you for a couple of minutes to calm you both down before Brenner took you. She always knew something was wrong and I always tried to convince her she was crazy. I wish I could undo that, but I can't. I can at least explain to you why I was such a shitty father to you and Jonathan, Will."

Will shook his head and looked away again. "I really don't care."

"It's not just about me, it's about your grandfather too. He deserves to be remembered," said Lonnie.

Will glanced back at Lonnie then looked at Eleven before staring at the door frame again. "Mom said he was a good guy. What about him?"

"He always liked your mother," said Lonnie. "He was a good man and I never appreciated that. I actually resented the fact that he was a good man."

"What do you mean?" asked Eleven.

"He was a pacifist. During the second World War, that made him a target for ridicule. He worked as an engineer, but that wasn't good enough for people. I got teased by the other kids and it caused me to resent him. He was a very gentle and sensitive person, and to a lot of people, that meant he wasn't a real man. I resented him for it-the irony is, I wasn't even man enough to sign up to fight in Nam. You and Jonathan are a lot like him. I unfairly resented both of you for that. I was too stupid to appreciate that I had a good man for a father and was lucky to have two sons that were good people like him."

Will continued to stare at the door frame. He took a couple of calming breaths. Lonnie continued as Eleven listened. "I was too stupid to realize that I was married to a great woman who was a great mother and I sold my own daughter to a bunch of mad scientists. I sold my own son years later.

"I just found out that they killed my father because he may have figured out the truth. You both deserved to know him and you never got the chance. Your mother named you after him, Will. She gave you his middle name, so I wouldn't realize she was naming you after

him."

"I know," said Will. "She told me."

"There's more. I can do at least one more thing for your mother. Brenner wanted me to keep her isolated from people she might confide in. I caused her fights with her sisters. If they all know the truth, they can fix their relationship."

"I'll tell them," said Eleven. She had never met her two aunts. She was curious though.

"I've realized it way too late," said Lonnie. "But, I love you. All of you. Will, you were a great kid who's grown into a great man. The same goes for your brother. Both of you-all three of you- are good people like your mother and your grandfather."

Lonnie's breathing became very shallow as some paramedics came in with Kali and Jane. The paramedics put Lonnie onto a gurney as Kali and Jane helped Will and Eleven to their feet.

"It's clear," said Kali. "Let's get you guys out of here."

"This guy's fading fast," said one of the paramedics while he took Lonnie's pulse.

"Hang on, Dad," said Will.

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"Are you sure this is where you want to be dropped off?" the cab driver asked Mike and Jonathan as he noticed all of the police cars with their lights flashing.

"This is the place," said Mike as he handed a twenty to the driver. "Keep the change."

Mike and Jonathan got out of the cab and started running toward the building. They saw a couple of paramedics standing next to a gurney outside of the ambulance. They were putting a sheet over a body.

"Did you get the time of death?" asked one of the paramedics.

"I got it," said the second paramedic. "Byers didn't stand a chance. That bullet hit too many vital organs."

"No! No! No!" said Jonathan. He ran over to the gurney, followed closely by Mike. He pulled the sheet back.

"Hey, you can't -" said the first paramedic.

"Dad?" said Jonathan.

"This man is your father?" asked the second paramedic.

Jonathan nodded and took a deep breath. "My name is Jonathan Byers. My daughter Barbara was kidnapped and brought down here. I'm looking for her as well as my brother Will Byers and sister Jane Hopper. Are they alright? Do you know where they are?"

"They're just over that way," said the first paramedic. "Your brother and sister are a little battered and your daughter's a little traumatized, but there's nothing life threatening."

Jonathan and Mike both breathed a sigh of relief. They looked to where the paramedic was pointing. Will and Eleven were sitting on the edge of an ambulance while paramedics took their vitals. Barbara sat in Will's lap and had her arms around his neck. Jonathan and Mike took off at a full sprint.

"Jonathan, Mike," said Will weakly as they reached the ambulance. He held Barbara out to Jonathan, who took her and pulled her into a tight hug as he started sobbing in relief. Eleven and Mike were in a full embrace within seconds. Will sat quietly and stared off at nothing. The paramedics said he was in shock.

After a minute, Jonathan sat next to Will and put an arm around him, pulling him into a hug. Will buried his face in his brother's shoulder as he'd done so many times when he was a kid.

"Thank God, you're alright. I thought I'd lost you," Jonathan sobbed. "I was so scared I was going to lose all three of you."

Will felt two more pairs of arms around him as Eleven and Mike joined in the hug. He'd felt numb since the paramedics called Lonnie's



death. He was slowly starting to feel again."

"We're okay," said Eleven. "You didn't lose us."

"It's over," said Mike.

"Yes, we're safe now," said Eleven.

"And you're going to stay that way," said the voice of an older man that none of them recognized. They looked up to see a man in his seventies standing with Kali and Jane.

Will, El, Jonathan, this is your cousin Stephen Byers," said Jane. "He is who he says he is." She tapped her forehead.

"Nice to finally meet you Will and Ellie. I haven't seen you since your grandfather's-My uncle Edmund's- funeral, Jonathan," said Steven. He noticed. "You must be Mike Wheeler."

"Why are you here now?" asked Jonathan.

"I've been monitoring this group of people for months. The identities of the MKUltra children have been sealed for years. Sam Owens did a very good job protecting them while he was alive. I've been investigating a group of people who planned on killing all the MKUltra subjects for months. I had no idea until today that they were targeting my cousin's kids. Didn't even know he had a daughter or that Will here had powers. Now that I do know, I can protect you."

## 6. Chapter 6 The Funeral

### Chapter Six

Will stared out the window at the February snow the Wednesday after getting back from Florida. Being in sunny Orlando felt like a dream that had turned into a nightmare. Seeing *Star Wars* in the theater with his closest friends felt like ages ago. He'd been so happy living the dream. Then people had tried to kill him, his sister and his niece. For over a decade, they had all felt safe. It seemed as though the events between 1983 and 1985 were behind them. Recent events had left them wondering if things would even fully be behind them.

Amber had broken things off with him. She had come to see him Monday night when he, Mike, and El got back from the airport. The kidnapping had made the national news, though they had left out the part about Barbara and Steven Byers had given the cover story that Tucker and Dex were merely people obsessed with Will's story. The stories had brought up Will's disappearance in 1983.

Amber had insisted on having the details and Will had told her the old story about being kidnapped by Brenner who had killed Barbara Holland with experimental chemicals. He had explained to Amber about how he suffered from PTSD from the events.

*"I'm sorry, I can't deal with this,"* Amber had said.

Sarah and El had both wanted to go after Amber and give her a piece of their minds.

*"Leave her alone,"* Will told them. *"Besides, this is what you've been wanting anyway. Neither of you ever liked her."*

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Will looked over at Karen Wheeler, who had come up from Hawkins, sitting with Nancy and Barbara in the living room. She looked more anxious than Will had ever seen her. It was one thing for her to learn that her only son's best friend and girl friend had special abilities and were targets of mad scientists. It was something else to learn that her

children through Nancy would have those same abilities and likely be targets as well. Mike would likely have children with El one day and that would mean that even more of Karen's grand children would have abilities.

"There's an old family plot in Hawkins," said Stephen. "I've already made funeral arrangements. He had you as his next of kin, Jonathan. There were a lot of old debts."

"I'll take care of those," said Will. "Jonathan has a family now."

"Don't worry about that, Bud," said Jonathan. "I knew about him making me his next of kin and I took out a life insurance policy a when I found out Nancy was pregnant with Barbara. It'll be taken care of."

"Okay," said Will as he took a deep breath and folded his hands in front of his face.

"What is it, Baby?" asked Joyce.

"We should have listened to him," said Will. "He really was trying to help us. You, El, Hopper, Barbara... all of you almost died because of my temper, because I couldn't just let him talk. He took a bullet to save me and as he was bleeding and dying all I could do was tell him that I hated him."

"Will, stop," said El. She got up from her spot next to Mike and walked over to her brother. She grabbed his shoulders. "He wouldn't want you to keep beating yourself up. We're all still alive, so we have to live good lives."

"I'm going for a walk," said Will to his friends. He couldn't stand just sitting there at the funeral lunch any longer.

"Do you need some company?" asked Lucas.

Will shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I just want to be alone and clear my head."

"Will, it's freezing out. You hate the cold," said Dustin.

"I live in Chicago," said Will. "This is nothing."

"You just shouldn't be alone," said Lucas. "It's not safe."

"I'll be fine," said Will. "There haven't been demogorgans or shadow monsters in Hawkins for over a decade. The people who tried to kill us are in jail and I have a very powerful sister who's always watching over me." Will patted Eleven on the shoulder before heading to the door.

"I'm worried about him," said Lucas as he watched Will talk to Joyce and Jonathan before going outside (Hopper had stayed at home with Sarah. He'd never been on the best of terms with Lonnie and his friends). Max squeezed Lucas' hand.

"Yeah, he's doing that whole hiding his feelings thing. He was a wreck last week," said Dustin.

"He'll be alright," said Mike. "He just needs to get it out of his system." Mike knew it was true. He wasn't sure exactly when Will would be okay again, but he knew it would happen and he was determined to be there for Will every step of the way.

Will sat on the park bench and stared at the frozen pond. He and El had taken Chester and Buttons for walks in that park several times. Will felt a lump in his throat as he thought of the deceased canines. He really missed those dogs. Will heard the crunch of snow. Someone was walking, came to an abrupt stop and apparently turned around.

"Julie?" said Will as he looked around to see a dark haired woman walking away from him. Julie slowly turned around looking a little embarrassed.

"I wasn't stalking you or anything," she said hastily with a cringe on her face. "And I didn't know you'd be at this park."

"Are you in town for my father's funeral?" asked Will. He realized that it was the first time in over a decade that he'd referred to Lonnie as his father.

"I, well," Julie started.

"It's your parent's anniversary," Will corrected himself. "Sorry, I forgot."

"Yeah," said Julie. "You know how charming some of my extended family can be. I needed a break."

"Ah, and you didn't have this," Will tapped his chest. He had been recovering from heart surgery when Julie's parents had their 25th anniversary party ten years earlier. Julie had told her family that Will needed to rest when some of her relatives were getting on their nerves. It was a good excuse to sneak off and make out. "as an excuse."

Julie smiled. "Nope, didn't have that."

"How's Greg doing with your relatives?"

"He's not here, we broke up last month," said Julie as she fidgeted with the hem of her glove.

"Oh, sorry, what happened...If you don't mind my asking?"

"You don't want to hear about it today of all days."

"Today of all days I really need a distraction, unless you don't want to talk about it."

"Alright," said Julie. She walked over and sat next to Will on the bench. "He wanted to get married...at least he said he was getting to that point in life where he should be married..."

"And you're not at that point?" asked Will with raised eyebrows.

"Not with him after the things he said."

"What did he say?"

"He said I wasn't like all the other girls."

"He clearly didn't know you if he used that wording," said Will.

Yep, he seemed to think I'd be flattered, but that wasn't the worst of

it. Get this, he wanted me to get rid of Inigo."

"Didn't you have that cat before you and Greg started dating."

"I did," said Julie. "Like if he doesn't like cats, he should date girls who don't already have cats."

"What an idiot," said Will.

"So how are things going with Amber?"

"We actually broke up a few days ago," said Will. "She said she could deal with... well things."

"Oh," said Julie. "Well, look at us. We can really pick 'em."

"Yeah, I guess we messed each other up," said Will lightly.

"You're probably right," said Julie. "We're hopeless."

"So, what else is going on? How's the music?"

"It's good. Mom and Dad don't think it's the greatest career path and since Tina and Brian have moved back to Hawkins they think I should too, but I actually got offered an adjunct position by one of my old mentors."

"The position isn't in Hawkins, is it?"

"No way, I have no intention of ever living here again. Actually... It's at the Chicago Art Institute."

Will looked up. "Really? Are you going to take it?"

"I haven't decided yet," said Julie. She stared out at the pond and beyond it to an area in the woods where she and Will had spend countless hours together when they were in high school. "I mean, I love Cincinnati and playing in the Pops Orchestra, but I can't make a living doing that forever and I always did like teaching."

"Yeah, I think Mrs. Wheeler will always be grateful to you for getting Holly involved in music," said Will. An awkward silence fell between

them as they both stared ahead. In the silence, the image of Will's dead father filled his mind. He tried to think of something else to say to Julie, but nothing came to mind. Tears of frustration started to spill down his cheeks and he buried his face in his hands. He felt Julie's arms around him as she pulled him into a hug. He sobbed on her shoulder.

After a few minutes, he sat up and wiped his face. "Sorry about that. I'd better get back before my friends and family start freaking out. I don't want to cause my mother any stress in her condition."

"Yeah, I'd better get back too," said Julie. "And you never have to be sorry about that. If you ever need anything, I'm always here for you, always."

"Thanks," said Will. They stood up and walked in opposite directions. Will stopped after a few steps. "Julie?"

Julie turned around. "Yes?"

"I-I think you should take that adjunct position. I mean, Chicago's really cold and all, but I think you'd like it there. And if you need a place to stay while you're looking for an apartment, you can stay with us and you can even bring Inigo. I'd have to ask Mike and El, but they never say no to anything I ask." Will took a deep breath. He felt self conscious for blurting out so much, but he was feeling a little impulsive.

"Oh," said Julie. "Um, I'll think about it. I'll call or email you next week, alright?"

"Yeah, cool," said Will.

Eleven walked directly over to Will when he got back to the rec center. She waved at her mother and Jonathan as she took Will's arm. "Let's get you warmed up before you get pneumonia."

Will didn't resist. He saw his friends watching him with concerned looks as Eleven guided him over to the fireplace. "I miss that park sometimes, but it makes me think of Chester and Buttons," said Eleven.

"How much did you hear?" asked Will.

"You weren't talking about anything too personal, so everything," said Eleven. "Mike and I never say 'no' to anything? Hmmmp!"

"Well, you never do."

"You almost never ask for anything, so we don't get much of a chance."

"Are you planning to say 'no' to this?"

"I can't turn away a cat," said Eleven. "Julie was smart to dump Greg if he wanted her to get rid of her cat. People should never get rid of their cats... or their dogs."

"Are you okay with this? She's not even sure if she'll take the job."

"She'll take the job," said Eleven. "And I'm okay with this. Mike will be too." Eleven sighed and gazed at the fire.

"What is it, El?"

"I was thinking about out Grandpa. Lonnie said that you and Jonathan were like him. Mom said he was a good man. I wish we could have known him."

"Yeah, me too," said Will. "I think the library's open. There might be some old articles on microfiche we can look at."

"Yeah, let's go, but I think we should drive. It's freezing."

"Agreed," said Will with a smile.

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That evening, the party members gathered in the Wheeler basement. Will and Eleven had a folder filled with printed articles about Edmund Byers from the library.

"I still can't believe Steve Harrington is baby sitting your kids," said Lucas to Dustin and Cathy.



"He's actually pretty good with them," said Dustin. "Hey Wheeler are you going to pick one before the end of the century?"

Mike flipped through his binder. He had planned several D&D campaigns over the years that were specifically meant for his childhood friends when they got together. "Got it," said Mike. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"We're always ready," said Lucas.

"Except when it all goes to shit," said Dustin.

"Nothing's going to shit tonight if I can help it," said Will as he picked up his old character.

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A/N: Okay, the main conflict of the fic is done. Future chapters will have less angst. Will and Eleven are still going to have issues, but this will move into their adult lives as they start the families that are in my fics that take place in 2018. There will also be Hopper and Joyce going into their golden years. Future chapters will have more fluff. I have a few things in mind, but feel free to let me know if there are any questions you want answered or anything you want to see. There will be a chapter that features Mike and Eleven getting married. And in the next couple chapters, Mike and Will are going to that Vegas convention mentioned in chapter 2.

## 7. Chapter 7 Shifting

*Ooopsie. Apparently I uploaded Chapter 7 of Breaking Through the Portal. Here's the correct chapter for this fic. Thank you for letting me know TorontoBatFan. You have a lot of great fics for a lot of different fandoms, so here's a plug because I think you deserve more readers and I'm grateful you let me know about my oopsie*

### Chapter 7

March 1997

"It'll be Spring in less than a week, and much easier to get around," said Sarah as she and Will unpacked the groceries for Hopper and Joyce on Friday afternoon. Sarah had been staying with them since the incident in February to make sure their medications weren't poisoned. "You'd think that people would realize they need to drive more carefully during winter by now."

"Some people just don't learn from experience," said Will as he handed Hopper a cup of tea. Hopper wrinkled his nose.

"Who's this Curtis who keeps calling, Sarah? Is he your boyfriend," asked Hopper. Sarah shrugged.

"We're still figuring things out," said Sarah.

"As much as I love having you here, you can figure things out that are going on in Philadelphia while you're in Chicago. I don't want you to put your life on hold, honey."

"Dad, a bunch of psychos tried to murder you and Joyce last month, I have to be sure you're safe," said Sarah.

"We've got people looking out for everyone now. You said yourself that you only sensed good intentions with Stephen Byers," said Hopper as Will sat quietly next to Joyce. He couldn't blame Sarah for feeling the way she did.

"He seems alright, but I just want to check your prescription refills myself for a little while longer," said Sarah. "I just, I need to be sure."

"Will could always make a portal to Philly and send the meds through. You could check 'em and send them right back," said Hopper. He winked at Will who grinned back, but Joyce shot her husband a warning look and Hopper cleared his throat. "That was a joke of course."

"I thought it was funny," said Will.

"It's going to stay a joke," said Joyce.

"It will, Mom, don't worry," said Will as he squeezed his mother's hand.

"Anyway," said Hopper. "I just want to make sure that you aren't trying to avoid anything back home."

"I'm not, Dad, I promise," said Sarah.

"Why don't you invite Curtis here. He can meet everyone," said Will. Sarah kicked his shin under the table. Will gave a small grunt, but grinned. "What?"

"That's a good idea," said Hopper.

"I'll think about it," said Sarah.

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Will went home after dinner. Julie was arriving that night. She was driving from Cincinnati and Will wasn't sure when she would get there, but he wanted to be there to greet her. Holly Wheeler was also staying for the weekend because she was checking out colleges. She was still out with Mike and El for the evening.

There was a package at the front door. Will recognized it as a late birthday present he'd gotten for Mike off of ebay. He picked it up along with the other mail and took it inside. Will opened the package and checked the foot of the Han Solo action figure. It had the initials "MW carved on the foot. Will remembered the day Mike had carved those initials on that foot. It was at Mike's birthday party when they were in second grade. If they'd been older, he never would have even taken the toys from their packages. Will checked the feet of the

Chewbacca, Leia, Lando and Luke figures. All of them had Mike's initials in them. Will remembered shoveling snow from several driveways that winter to buy Mike the set. He remembered Mike being forced to sell the set along with a lot of other toys at a garage sale in 1984. Mike had told Will that he was more upset about selling the toys because they had been gifts, than the kind of toys they were.

Will took the figures to his room and wrapped them as his cats Luke and Leia followed him. "You two are getting a new roommate tonight, are you excited?" Will put the gift in a storage container in his closet when he finished wrapping it, then got out his sketch pad and worked on his design for his and Mike's next video game.

Mike, El, and Holly arrived home 45 minutes later. "Hey there, how do you like Chicago so far?" Will asked Holly as she sat down on the sofa next to him.

"I think I want to see it again in the summer to get a better idea," said Holly as she reach over to pet Luke and Leia who were curled up next to Will.

Will noticed that Holly was wearing a pair of (factory) tie dyed bell bottom jeans with a No Doubt tee shirt. Much to Mrs. Wheeler's chagrin (according to Mike), Holly had colored her hair multiple shades of orange. Will got a kick out of the fact that bell bottoms seemed to be making a comeback as they were in when he and Mike were in kindergarten.

"That's probably a good idea, everything's better in the summer," said Will.

"How are Mom and Dad doing?" asked Eleven.

"They're alright. I may have suggested that Sarah have Curtis come for a visit."

"Oh really?" Mike asked. "How did she take that?" In response, Will lifted the leg of his jeans to reveal some slight bruising. "So better than expected."

"Much better," said Will.

"Is Julie going to be here soon?" asked Eleven.

"Probably," said Will. "But who knows with the traffic on 90.. and the lovely winter weather."

"Are you two back together?" asked Holly. Will saw Mike look a little anxious out of the corner of his eye. He was pretty sure why Mike wasn't thrilled with the idea of him getting back together with Julie and it wasn't because of any problems with Julie personally. Mike had always liked her as a person. Will had noticed Mike's lack of concern of his relationship with Amber when El and Sarah had always had less than charitable opinions of her. Mike was never exactly fond of Amber.

"No, she's just staying with us until she finds a place of her own," said Will. "Besides, we both just ended relationships."

Julie arrived around 7:30. Will put on his jacket to go out and help her carry her things in. Julie seemed a little shaken when she got out of her car.

"Are you alright?" asked Will.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Julie. "The traffic on the freeway was insane. The roads are slippery and people were not slowing down."

"Well, let's get your stuff inside so you can relax," said Will. Julie reached into her car and pulled out the cat carrier that contained Inigo, her gray and white cat. She handed it to Will.

"We should with the most important thing," said Julie. Will took the carrier and turned to see Mike and Eleven coming out to help. Holly followed a few seconds later.

"How was your trip?" asked Mike.

"As good as it could have been driving three hundred miles in winter when there's no shortage of idiots on the road," said Julie.

"You haven't brought very much, all things considered," said Mike as he peaked into Julie's station wagon to see a couple of suit cases, her cello, four small boxes and a bag of cat supplies.

"I got rid of a lot of stuff and put some things in my old room at my parents house last week," said Julie.

The group had Julie's things put in Will's room (Holly was staying in the spare bedroom for the weekend) within a few minutes. "I can sleep in the living room for a couple days, you don't have to give up your room," said Julie as she let Inigo out of his carrier. He darted under Will's bed.

"It's fine, don't worry about it," said Will. "You've had a long trip and need something more comfortable than the couch." Will's cat Luke stuck his paw under the bedroom door from the hallway.

"Luke seems thrilled."

"He'll get over it. By the way, did you catch that new Buffy show? It was way better than I thought any TV show based on a guilty pleasure movie could be."

Julie smiled as she took off her boots and stretched her feet. "I was surprised how much I liked it. I think it's pretty funny that a couple of those actors are our age and playing high school sophomores."

Holly sat out in the living room staring wistfully at Will's room. "Are you okay?" asked Mike as he handed her a root beer.

"Huh?" said Holly, "yeah I'm fine, why?"

"You just look a little distracted. Were you hoping Will would wait until you were legal before he started dating again?" asked Mike teasingly.

"What? No! Shut-up!" Holly playfully punched Mike in his shoulder.

"Don't worry. I don't think it's weird. He was always your favorite." Mike grinned

"That's because he was always the nicest to me!"

"True, but Will was always the nicest to everyone... Unless they were assholes."

"Good, that means I'm not an asshole," said Holly. She started laughing, sat up and pulled her brother into a choke hold. "I can't say the same for you!"

"Hey, not fair. You're still a minor and I can't legally fight back!" said Mike.

"Good excuse, big brother. You know you'd lose!"

"I've personally seen Mike go up against guys twice his size," said Eleven as she entered the room. "But I still think you could give him a run for his money, Holly."

The teenager released her brother and sat back down casually. "See, even your girlfriend agrees."

"Ah well, she'd know," said Mike.

"She'd know what?" asked Will as he entered the living room.

"That I could take my brother in a fight," said Holly.

"Hey! She attacked me and I was just pointing out that I can't legally fight back because she's still a minor," said Mike in a mock whiny voice. Will held out his hands in mock surrender.

"I don't want to get involved, but maybe you can challenge him to a rematch in 15 months, Holly," said Will.

"Where's Julie?" asked Eleven.

"Resting. She's a little shaken from trying to drive up 65 in this weather," said Will.

"I would be too," said Mike.

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Will was laying on the living room sofa, still wide awake three hours after everyone else went to bed. He had experienced several sleepless nights since Lonnie had died. The image of Lonnie jumping in front of the bullet to save him continually flashed in his mind. With that

image were the thoughts of his inability to forgive his birth father for the things Lonnie had done to his family. He couldn't reconcile those two things and it kept him up at night. Will punched his pillow in frustration then clutched the fabric of the pillow as he pushed his face into it.

"Hey," said Julie as Will felt her hand on his back. He looked up at her.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you." Will sat up and glance down the hall toward the bedrooms, hoping that he hadn't woken Eleven, Mike, or Holly.

"You didn't," said Julie. "I was just getting a glass of water. Couldn't sleep myself. Nerves about moving to a new city and starting a new job, I guess."

"Yeah. Yeah, that makes sense," said Will as he ran his hands through his hair. Julie smiled a little as she remembered one of their shared jokes when they were in high school. Her smile faltered before Will looked back at her as she recalled what had happened to him a few weeks earlier.

"You still toss and turn a lot."

Will took a deep breath and glanced over at her. "I do. I may do it for the rest of my life. So many things have happened. So many things still *could* happen."

Julie perched on the couch. "I know," she said quietly.

"Barbara has abilities...Jonathan didn't, but his daughter does. Well, El can communicate telepathically with him and Mom. Not as easily as she can with me, but if she channels through a radio or something, they can hear her. It runs in the family...They stopped the people who tried to kill us this time, but they probably won't be the only people."

Julie stared at her feet for a few seconds and tapped her fingers on her knee. "I know about it...All of it. I experienced some of it first hand."



"It could keep happening."

"Maybe. Or maybe you've seen the last of it. If it does happen, you don't have to be alone and the shitty people in this world shouldn't stop you from having a happy life," said Julie. There was a brief awkward silence. Julie held out her hand to Will. "C'mon, you're not going to get any sleep out here."

"Huh?"

"Your bed is huge, there's plenty of room for both of us, and I'm not trying to seduce you tonight. Oh, and my parents aren't here to fret over this harmless thing and lecture me."

"That's a solid argument," said Will.

"Of course it is. Let's go."

Will grabbed the pillow and blankets off the couch and followed Julie to his room. Luke managed to sneak past them as they opened the door. His hair stood on end as he saw Inigo who darted under the bed. "They'll get used to each other, they just need time."

"They'll have time," said Julie.

"Plenty of time," said Will as he crawled under the covers. Julie did the same on her side. He turned off the light, but the street lamps outside still provided some illumination. Will closed his eyes as he tried to fall asleep. His mind drifted to Lonnie again and tears formed in his eyes. He thought about going back out to the couch as he didn't want to keep Julie up all night with his restlessness. Will reached up and wiped his eyes.

"What is it?" asked Julie as she turned toward him.

"Sorry, didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't sleeping."

"Right, well I didn't mean to keep you up."

"Will, I had three close calls with over compensating drivers today."

It's left me a little shaken. I'm keeping myself up. It's been a while, but I can still tell when you're holding things in. So let it out."

Will turned toward Julie and considered her carefully for a few minutes. "Lonnie died because he took a bullet that was meant for me. He saved my life and one of the last things I said was that I hated him. He did a lot more for El than he ever did to me and she didn't tell him she hated him."

Julie listened to Will as he spoke. She had only been in the same room with Lonnie Byers twice. The first time was when he threatened to have officers arrest Joyce if Will didn't go and stay with him for the weekend. Of course, Lonnie had ended up handing Will over to mad scientists. The second time was when he made a drunken scene at Jonathan and Nancy's wedding. Julie couldn't blame Will for hating Lonnie. It seemed as though Will hadn't lost the habit of being overly harsh on himself in his adult.

"I wish I could say something to make it all go away," said Julie as she reached over and caressed the side of his face.

"Sometimes there just isn't anything to say," said Will as he closed his hand around hers. More tears welled up in his eyes. Julie moved closer and pulled him into an embrace as he cried into her shoulder.

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It was a little before 9 am when Will woke up Saturday morning. It was a sunny morning and Will felt well rested considering the trouble he'd been having getting to sleep at night in the last few weeks. Luke was curled up next to him purring. Like looked over to see Inigo resting near Julie's feet. He smiled as he thought of the two cats coming to a truce. He and Julie had been entangled together while they slept so his light movements to look out the window and look at the cats had woken her up.

"What time is it?" she muttered.

"It's almost nine," said Will as he sat up and looked at his alarm clock. Julie groaned and pulled the covers over her head.

"Ugh! I shouldn't still feel so tired!"

"You did just move from two states over yesterday. And you've been packing stuff up all week. It's okay to sleep in a little once in a while. God knows I do, all the time."

Julie peaked out from under the blankets with a small twinkle in her eyes. "I remember."

Will got up and grabbed some clothes from his dresser and a couple of clean towels. "Sleep in as long as you need to. If you feel up later, I'll show you around the area or we can have lunch with my parents."

"Sounds good," said Julie as she pulled the covers back over her head. Will took a shower and got dressed. He went back into his room to throw his pajamas in the laundry basket and grabbed Mike's late birthday present.

It seemed like everyone else was still asleep, which was very unusual as Will was normally the last person to wake up. He sat at the table and read the paper while he drank coffee. Mike and Eleven came home a few minutes. Apparently, they had woken up before him.

"I thought I was the first person up for once," said Will. "Oops, guess not."

Eleven smiled a little. "Not a chance, sleepy head. At least with a couple guests in the house, you aren't the last." She walked over, gave Will a one armed hug, and kissed him on the forehead. Mike went over and put on a pot of coffee.

"Did you go and see Mom and Dad or something?" asked Will. Although he had never quite lost the habit of calling his adoptive father "Hopper" Will occasionally unconsciously referred to him as "Dad."

"Yeah, Dad's really interested in meeting Curtis now. Sarah said that she "really appreciates" you bringing that up," said Eleven.

"It was my pleasure," said Will with a grin as he continued to read the paper. Eleven went over to the kitchen cabinets and grabbed some coffee cups.

"Looks like you didn't spend the whole night on the couch," said Mike as he turned from the brewing coffee and leaned on the counter. Will grimaced and started harder at his paper.

"Nope, I didn't."

Mike and Eleven exchanged a look. "You did just break up with Amber and she just broke up with Greg..." said Eleven.

"C'mon, El, you never liked Amber anyway. And just to put both of your minds at ease, all Julie and I did last night was talk a little and fall asleep."

"Sorry, Will, we don't mean to pry or anything," said Mike. "But we just don't want you rushing into anything. She was your first girlfriend, after all and you might be feeling a little impulsive."

Will looked up from his paper and rolled his eyes at Mike.

"What?" asked Mike.

"So what if she was my first girlfriend? My sister is your first and only girlfriend. Julie and I have dated other people over the years, so we've at least experienced other relationships. And we have plenty of time to figure things out. We aren't rushing into things. Speaking of taking time to figure things out, when are you two getting married?"

"Nice dodge," said Mike.

"It's not a dodge," said Will. "You've been together for over twelve years."

"We're just waiting until I get my doctorate," said Eleven.

"Yeah and once you get your degree, you'll be using the excuse that you're waiting until your practice is established," said Will.

"What?" said Mike. "That's ridiculous. Anyway, we're not talking about us, we're talking about you. You've been through a lot recently, Will."

"Yeah and I'll probably always go through a lot, but you two can't

spend your lives watching over me," said Will.

"What does that mean?" asked Mike.

"It means that I know why you never complained about Amber, but you're worried about me possibly rushing into a relationship with Julie," said Will. "You knew that things would never last with Amber. As long as I was in relationships that wouldn't last, the three of us could just go on living together and you two could keep protecting me. It's been fun having it be just the three of us for the past few years, but we'll be thirty before we know it, then we'll suddenly be forty. We can't go on like this forever, we just can't."

"We haven't been making you feel like a third wheel, have we?" asked Eleven timidly.

"No, of course not," said Will. "I just don't want you to put your lives on hold because of me." Will looked at Mike who was staring at his feet. "Are you still having the nightmares, Mike?"

"Yeah, sometimes. I'm trying not to let them get to me, but they just do," said Mike. "Are you still having your nightmares?"

"Sometimes," said Will. "And they still bother me, but I don't want to let them run my life. I figure the best way to do that is to keep making good memories. Speaking of good memories-" Will felt he'd made the perfect transition into giving Mike his belated birthday present. He reached under the table, pulled it out and handed it to Mike.

"What is this?" asked Mike.

"Belated birthday present," said Will.

"You already got me plenty of presents," said Mike.

"Is there some law that says there's a limit?" asked Will.

"Fair point," said Mike. He ripped off the wrapping paper and opened the box. "Oh, wow, where'd you find these?"

"Ebay," said Will. "Check out the feet."

Mike turned over the Chewbacca figure. His eyes widened as he saw his own initials that he had carved into the feet of the figures when he was seven years old. He picked up the rest of the figures to see the initials on all of their feet.

"Are those?" asked Eleven.

"Yeah," said Mike. "Will shoveled a lot of snow so he could get these for me for my birthday. That's why I hated that my Mom made me sell these at a garage sale. My parents didn't understand why they had so much emotional value."

"When you two eventually get married, you can pass them on to my nieces and nephews," said Will.

"We're not sure if we're going to have kids," said Eleven. "Look at what those people tried to do to Barbara...and us."

"Well, we have each other and we'll always have each other. We've got a long lost cousin as well as Kali and Jane and their team looking out for us. You've always wanted kids and you'll be a wonderful mom, El. Don't let some psychos prevent that."

"Okay," said Eleven as she hugged her brother. "For what it's worth, I think you'd be a great dad and Julie would be a great mom."

"For what it's worth, I'm not rushing into anything with her. That being said, we did only break up because we went to different schools and we never stopped caring about each other. So I'm not going to try to take it slow because I'm worried about rushing things. Whatever happens, happens, alright?"

"Fair enough," said Mike. "Speaking of birthdays, yours is next week. Would you be super pissed if there was a surprise party?"

"Yeah, no parties. Just something simple," said Will.

## 8. Chapter 8 Vegas

### Chapter 8

April 1997

"You two have a lot of nerve showing your faces here," said April to Eleven and Julie as they walked down the hall to meet Mike and Will in their office. They were all planning on having dinner with Hopper and Joyce before leaving for Vegas the next morning.

"Excuse me?" said Eleven.

"After what your brother did. He suddenly dumps my friend and he's already with *her*," said April as she pointed and glared at Julie.

"Did Amber tell you Will dumped her?" asked Eleven.

"Of course she did, I'm her friend," said April.

"Well, she's full of shit!" said Eleven as her eyes narrowed at April. "I knew she was a drama queen who tried to make herself look like the victim all the time, but I'm not going to let her spread lies about Will. She broke up with him because she couldn't handle things. I was there. Besides, Amber's already seeing someone new, why should she care if Will is moving on with his life?"

"Oh, well I-" April stammered.

"You just had somewhere else to go," said Eleven. April hurried off.

"Maybe I should have set Amber up with Greg," said Julie. "They both just wanted to get married because they were afraid to be single and they liked pretend to be nice."

"You and Will don't have to worry about them any more," said Eleven. When they got to the office, Mike and Will were putting some papers into portfolios.

"Great timing," said Mike. "We just finished up here. We are so ready for Vegas."

"Yeah," said Will. "It's really warm there."

"I was just talking to Jennifer on the phone today," said Julie as she walked up behind Will, wrapped her arms around his waste and rested her chin on his shoulder. "She said that the timeshare people are really pushy there. If anyone comes up to us and asks us if it's our first time in Vegas, we should run."

"Good to know," said Will.

"Jennifer's been to Vegas?" asked Mike. Julie nodded.

"She went with some friends from college a couple years ago."

"Did you know that Amber has been telling people you dumped her?" Eleven asked Will.

"What?" asked and astonished Mike. "No wonder April's been giving you dirty looks all the time."

"I bet you set the record straight, El," said Will.

"I sure did. Amber would do well to avoid me."

"She's not worth it," said Will.

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Between the long wait to check in at "O'hare international, the actual flight, the wait at baggage claim at McCarran, and the long line to check in at the Excalibur Mike, Will, Eleven and Julie were feeling pretty tired Thursday afternoon.

"Why don't we all rest for a few hours before we have dinner and catch a show tonight," said Mike as he checked his watch while they waited in the slow moving check in line.

"Sounds like a plan," said Will as he stifled a yawn.

"How about you and Julie keep our place in the check in line while El and I go to the box office and get tickets to the show?"



"Sure," said Will. Mike and Eleven headed to the box office.

"Never thought that the first thing we did when we got to Vegas would be to take a nap," said Julie as she wrapped her arms around Will and rested her head on his chest to listen to his heart beat. "But life is full of surprises."

"It sure is," said Will with a smile.

"Jennifer said it takes a while to get on the elevators, so we have that to look forward too as well," said Julie. Will laughed and kissed her forehead.

Mike and Eleven were able to get the tickets at the box office fairly quickly. She noticed some slot machines nearby. She glanced at the check in line and saw that Will and Julie had moved up a bit, but still had a ways to go before they were at the front of the line.

"Can we try those really quick?" Eleven asked Mike.

"Yeah, why not?" said Mike. He pulled some cash out of his wallet and handed it to her. She picked a machine that had some horses on it, inserted the cash and pulled the lever.

"Wait until I tell Will and Julie that I won 42 dollars," said Eleven as she took the voucher from the machine. Mike gave her a questioning look. "Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy! Duh!"

"Oh, right," said Mike with a laugh. "I must really be tired if I didn't get that one."

After the group was finally able to check in and get through the crowded elevators, they settled in their rooms.

"See you at 7," said Mike to Will. "9 o'clock Chicago time."

"See you then. We are going to experience the shit out of this town," said Will. Mike gave him the thumbs up before going into his own room with Eleven. She immediately pulled one of her text books and a notebook from her suitcase, kicked her shoes off and sat on the bed.

"I'm sure you won't fall behind if you take a break from that while

we're here," said Mike as Eleven began taking notes. He took off his own shoes and sat next to her on the bed.

I plan on taking several breaks while we're here. I just want to get a little work in before tonight."

Mike smiled. He scooted to the end of the bed, pulled off Eleven's socks and began to massage her feet. "You and Will are alike in so many ways." She sighed in pleasure.

"Keep doing that, will you? It's helping me focus."

"Your wish is my command," said Mike.

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"What happens in Vegas..." said Julie as she stroked Will's hair While he rested his forehead on her shoulder. As he slowly exhaled, his breath brushed her armpit and she giggled. "Hey, that tickles!"

Will propped himself up on his elbows and folded his hands under his chin. He raised his eyebrows. "Maybe it's revenge for all those times you tickled me in high school."

"I just happened to find a ticklish spot on you," said Julie as she reached over and ran her fingers across his abdomen. He laughed. "And I see it's still there."

"At least now I can even the playing field a little," said Will as he ran his fingers over her armpit and she giggled. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled into a snug embrace. She traced the heart surgery scar on his chest and looked up to see him staring out the window at the clear sky and to the desert beyond the city.

"It was a pretty long winter. You want to go out and feel some of that Vegas heat?" asked Julie. Will looked down at her.

"Aren't you tired?"

"I was tired waiting in all those lines, but that's over now. How about we take a shower, put on a shit load of sunscreen, and check out the city?"

"One shower?" asked Will.

"Of course one show. Earth day is almost here and we're in the desert," said Julie.

"It is important to take environmentally responsible actions."

"Super important."

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"Think we can make it to Cesar's Palace?" asked Julie. "There's probably a lot to see between here and there."

"We did both wear our walking shoes," said Will. They both stopped as they saw a wedding chapel. "Do you want to go in there?" asked Will after two minutes of silence. Julie looked pensive.

"I don't know. I've never really wanted a big wedding, but I did want our family and friends there... well \*some\* family...wait are you serious?"

"Would it be weird if I said that I am seriously considering it? I mean, I told Mike and El that we weren't going to rush into things, but I also said that we weren't going force ourselves to take things super slow just because we were afraid of rushing."

"Hmmm," said Julie. "I kind of really want to. Tina and Brian's weddings were both super stressful and spontaneous can be really romantic...but I also want the people we care about to be there. I don't know."

"But you do want to get married?"

"You know what? I do, I really do."

"So do I," said Will. "How about this: we go on that walk to see the city and figure out whether we want to go to that chapel or have a wedding with friends and family. There are plenty of shops along the strip, I can get you a ring."

Julie smiled broadly. "We're really doing this?"

Will took Julie's hand and got down on one knee. "We really are. Julie Mason, will you marry me?"

"Yes," said Julie. Will stood up and kissed her. Several people who saw Will get down on one knee started to applaud. "So much for no attracting attention."

"Oops," said Will. A man in a suit approached them.

"Congratulations," he said. "Is this your first time in Vegas?"

"It's actually our 42nd time," said Will. He took Julie's hand and they ran to the hotel exit.

"This is all part of a clever plan to get your Tonka truck back, isn't it?" asked Julie.

"It will legally be half mine once we're married," said Will. "I can't believe you kept in all these years."

"I'm keeping it forever."

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"Wanna mess with Mike and El a little and tell them we went to the chapel?" asked Julie as she indicated the sapphire embedded in the silver band on her hand. She and Will both thought that gold and diamonds were boring.

Will grinned mischievously. "Yep." They walked into the Luxor where they were meeting Mike and Eleven for dinner.

"Where have you guys been?" asked Mike as they sat down at the table and the waiter brought them drinks.

"I wanted to feel the Vegas sun, so we did some sight seeing," said Will.

"See anything interesting?" asked Eleven.

"Tons of things," said Will.



plenty of privacy as they thought it would be a cool experience to make out at the Grand Canyon.

"What better place is there to become officially engaged than the most beautiful place on Earth?" asked Mike as he pulled out a ring that Eleven had seen and loved at a Renaissance festival a few years earlier. Mike had secretly bought the ring there and carried it in his various wallet as he waited for the right moment to propose.

Eleven eyed the ring with uncertainty. "This isn't just because Will and Julie got engaged, is it?"

"No. I mean, their engagement and our planned trip here did kind of inspire me; but we've loved each other since we were twelve. And Will was right when he said we don't have to wait for you to finish your degree. We've known for a long time that we want to spend our lives together."

Eleven agreed with everything Mike had said. She also considered the fact that while the cancer treatments for her parents seemed to be working, she didn't know how much time she had left with them and she wanted them to be there when she married Mike. "Aren't you supposed to get down on one knee?"

"Oh, right, sorry." Mike got down on one knee. "Will you marry me, El?"

"Yes!" Mike stood up and put the ring on her finger. He kissed her as she wrapped her arms around his neck and put her head on his shoulder.

"I've done two best things in my life that made every good thing happen you know," Mike whispered into Eleven's ear. "Asked Will to be my friend the first day of kindergarten and bringing you home that night we found you in the rain."

"I'm really glad you did those things," said Eleven. She looked over Mike's shoulder and saw a group of kids daring each other to get closer and closer to the edge. She jerked her head slightly and they fell forward away from the edge catching the attention of their mothers who gave them a scolding. Mike had felt the head jerk and

looked over to see the kids, then back at Eleven as she wiped blood from her nose. "Sorry, I had to. They were getting to close."

Mike quickly looked around. No one seemed to have noticed and he breathed a sigh of relief and pulled Eleven back into a hug. "It's okay, El, it's okay."

"Promise me something, Mike."

"What's that?"

"Don't let your parents talk you into having the wedding in Hawkins. I don't want to get married near the lab."

"Not a chance," said Mike. "Besides, I heard a candy company bought that building- Sweetums."

"We're never eating that candy," said Eleven.

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AN: just as a reminder because I don't think it's been mentioned since the first prologue chapter of MKUltra Ripple: Julie is the girl from the dance at the end of season 2. I decided to put in the Tonka truck connection and considered using Jennifer Hayes as Will's girlfriend, but went with the girl at the dance because a lot of other fics have used Jennifer Hayes and the girl at the dance seems to get dumped on a lot.

Eleven's research is going to be important in future chapters in helping some of the other children of MKUltra test subjects.

Mike and Will were invited to a convention in Vegas because of their video games. They will be working on interactive online games in the future.

## 9. Chapter 9 The Newest Byers

### Chapter 9

May 1997

Will carried over a couple of paper plates to Hopper and Ted Wheeler. Ted had fallen asleep and was snoring so Will simply sat that plate down beside him. The Masons and the Wheelers were throwing a joint engagement party for Mike and Eleven and Will and Julie as an excuse to get the four twenty somethings to visit Hawkins. Will and Eleven both suspected that their future in-laws were hoping to talk the couples into having their weddings in their hometown.

"Here, eat this," said Will as he handed the plate that was mostly filled with vegetables. Hopper took a bite of radish and started to gag. Will had anticipated that and handed him a napkin from the pile of napkins he'd grabbed knowing how his step father felt about healthy food in general.

Hopper spit the radish into the napkin then looked around like he was figuring out what to do with it. "I got it," said Will as he held out his hand. Hopper handed the napkin to it and Will took it to a nearby garbage can. "You get three spit ups, then you have to eat the rest. Use them wisely."

"Ah c'mon, kid, vegetables are disgusting," said Hopper lightly as he brushed his hand on his shirt.

"They may be disgusting, but they're good for you," said Will. "Now eat them up, I've lost one father and I'm not going to lose another." Will's eyes widened. He looked embarrassed as though he had just directed some disgusting insult at Hopper. "I mean, sorry. I-sorry."

"There's nothin' to be sorry for, kid," said Hopper. "Lonnie did a lot of terrible things, but it seems like he was trying to make up for them in the end. He died saving you. I'm not going to feel insulted if you refer to him as your father once in a while. It looks like he was at least trying to be that in the end."



Hopper bit into a piece of broccoli, chewed it up and swallowed it with great effort. He made a face. Will picked at the cuff of his dress shirt. "I know, but I just still feel so angry at him for everything. El's forgiven him, why can't I?"

"You sister's forgiven Lonnie for selling her to Brenner. She *\*hasn't\** quite forgiven him for the things he did to your mother, you or Jonathan. And I've heard you talk about being angry with Lonnie for selling El, for taking El from your mother and trying to convince her she's crazy, and for making Jonathan kill that rabbit, but I've never heard talk talk about being angry with him for putting you down all the time when you were little or selling you to Brenner," said Hopper.

"I've talked about those last two things," said Will.

"You've listed them has reasons why you didn't trust Lonnie, but never as reasons why you were angry with him. My point, Will, is that sometimes it's easier to forgive people for what they've done to us personally, than it is for what they've done to the people we care about. Take it one day at a time. You'll forgive Lonnie when you're ready." Hopper ate a carrot. "Well, that was less disgusting than the broccoli."

Will laughed, then glanced over at the table where his mother was sitting with a group of mothers of his old classmates. He wished that Julie and Eleven were sitting with her. Julie was with her mother and some aunts and cousins near the kitchen counter. The frustrated expression on her face told Will that they were trying to talk her into moving back to Hawkins. Tina was patting Julie on the shoulder.

Mrs. Wheeler had Mike and Eleven in another area. They both looked as annoyed as Julie. Holly was standing near Eleven, but listening to a CD on her walk-man. Mrs. Wheeler really wanted a Hawkins wedding as well. Will wished that Dustin and Lucas could have made it, but the party was thrown together on short notice and they couldn't get out of work commitments. Lucas was busy on the Pathfinder project and Dustin had a scheduled expedition to Madagascar. Jonathan and Nancy couldn't come because it was too close to Nancy's due date. Their other friends from school had been unable to make it as well on such short notice.

Will looked back at the group of women sitting with his mother. Mrs. Sinclair and Mrs. Henderson were both there. They had always been kind to Joyce. Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Mason had always been nice to her as well. At least Will and El weren't marrying into families who had treated their mother with contempt or looked at her as the town loon. Some of the women sitting with Joyce were mothers of Will's old classmate-classmates of whom he had so often made his life and the lives of his friends a living hell. The mothers of those classmates often looked down their noses at Joyce because her work schedule made it impossible to make it to every school function. There they were, showing her fake kindness.

"What's going through your mind, kid?" asked Hopper. Will looked over at Ted to make sure he was still sleeping despite being able to hear his snores.

"I was just thinking about why Julie and I as well as Mike and El don't want to have our weddings here. I mean, I'm looking at some of those women sitting with Mom and being fake polite to her. They always looked down on her and talked about her being an unfit mother. You and I know she's the best. Some of my school friends' parents are here, but pretty much everyone we were close to has left town for a better life."

Hopper leaned a little closer to Will and lowered his voice. "Yeah, well take comfort in the fact that those women being fake polite to your mother are jealous of her now."

"Yeah, right!" Will scoffed.

"It's true. Your Mom and I were still around until last year. We always heard a lot of the parents of your classmates complaining about how they hardly ever hear from their kids, even your classmates who stayed in town hardly spend any time with their parents. You Jonathan and El were always calling us to see how we were doing. We get sick and you move us to Chicago to get effective treatment. Even when you were growing up, those other moms were jealous because your mom had a kid like you."

"Okay, now you're really full of shit. Half the town was calling my a fairy and Hawkins isn't exactly friendly toward gay people."

"This town has plenty of idiots," said Hopper. "But people generally thought you were a good kid. Mr. Clarke talked about what a great student you were when he was helping with the search party. I also remember your Mom and I going to parent-teacher conferences for you and your sister. When we were waiting in line, we could see some of those women who used to look down of Joyce talking to teachers who didn't look to happy. Those teachers always started smiling when we walked up to the table. They had nothing but good things to say about you. I know it's not easy to come back to Hawkins when you've started a good life somewhere else, but don't let this place and the past get to you too much."

"You've got a point," said Will.

"I've got a lot of points," said Hopper. "Julie's parents want her to come back to Hawkins because she's their youngest and they're having a hard time letting her go. Karen's having a hard time letting go of Mike and Holly's going to go off to college next year. They all want you guys to have your weddings in Hawkins, but in the end, it's your choice and they'll have to live with that."

"Hey there, chief," said Powell. "Good to have you back in Hawkins."

"I see you're eating vegetables," said Callahan. "Has hell frozen over?"

"It came pretty close this winter," said Hopper.

"Hey there, chief," said Dennis Mason, Julie's father. "Mind if borrow my future son-in-law?"

"Sure thing, Dennis. Just bring my kid back in once piece, I'm pretty fond of him, even if he does make me eat healthy."

"I'll look after Will. My daughter's pretty fond of him too," said Mr. Mason.

"Make sure he finishes his vegetables," said Will to Callahan and Powell. "Flo's over there if you need help convincing him. My sister can help too."

"Follow me, Will," said Mr. Mason. Julie gave him a nervous look as they walked past the kitchen on the way to the back yard. Will

imagined the Mr. Mason was about to have the 'don't hurt my daughter' talk with him. Julie's parents had always liked Will, but things might be different now that he was marrying their youngest child and dashing their hopes of her moving back to Hawkins. Will followed him into the tool shed.

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Eleven had similar thoughts to the women sitting with her mother (with the exception of Mrs. Sinclair and Mrs. Henderson) that Will did. She and Julie (followed by Mrs. Mason and Tina) decided to go rescue Joyce to show her some old pictures from when the party was in high school. This left Mike alone with his mother and sister.

"There are a lot of nice new venues around here," said Karen. "Are you sure that you and El don't want to check them out while you're here?"

"Mom, Nancy and Jonathan didn't want to have their wedding in Hawkins and you and Dad guilted them into it. Look what happened. I'm sorry, but we just want to get married in Chicago because that's where our life is now."

"Yeah, give it a rest, Mom," Holly chimed in. Karen shot her a warning look, but Holly was unfazed.

"Look, it's nothing against you, Mom," said Mike. "But Will and El have been through hell in this town. There's a lot of past trauma for them here."

"And they've been dragging you into their trauma for years," Karen blurted out. Her hand flew to her mouth.

"What did you say?" asked Mike.

"Look, I didn't mean anything against Will or El. It's just that you've gotten into some dangerous situations over the years because of them and you've planned your life around them and now my grand children are in danger-"

Mike held up his hand. "Are you seriously blaming them for everything? They didn't ask for any of it."

"Michael, please!" said Karen and she tried to grab his arm.

"No, Mom! You're talking about the woman I love, my best friend, my brother-in-law and their mother who is a great mother, by the way. I need some space." Mike left the kitchen and Holly followed.

Karen walked to the counter and poured herself a glass of wine. She didn't want to blame Joyce and her children for Nancy and Mike leaving, but she couldn't help it. She had always been fond of Will Byers, but it seemed as though the emptiness Karen felt was a result of Mike becoming friends with him. If Mike hadn't gone looking for Will, he wouldn't have met Eleven. If Jonathan and Barbara hadn't worked together to fight the demogorgan, they may have never started dating. Maybe Mike would never have gone to Chicago and Nancy would have never gone to New York. Karen hated that she had those thoughts, but they were ever present in her mind- especially with her children leaving home.

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"There's no reason to be nervous," said Mr. Mason. "I know my wife really wants you two to have the wedding in Hawkins, but I didn't bring you out here to talk about that. I'm not going to give you that whole 'I'll kill you if you hurt my daughter' speech. Julie would probably think that's pretty cliché. I just have a few questions."

"Ask me anything," said Will.

"I noticed that you're still pretty shy at parties," said Mr. Mason.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I know you put a lot of work into this party," said Will.

"Don't worry about that, son," said Mr. Mason. "I count myself very lucky that your worst quality is that you're a little shy. I just want to know if you're taking care of yourself."

"Taking care of myself?"

"Yeah, I see you looking after your parents, but are you looking after yourself?"

"Well, I mean, my parents have cancer."

"I know that, Will," said Mr. Mason. "But you had open heart surgery ten years ago and I remember how upset my daughter was all the time leading up to that surgery. I also know you went through something very stressful three months ago when those people attacked you and killed your birth father. I want Julie to be happy and if she loses you, she won't be."

"Oh, that," said Will.

"Yes, that."

"I've been seeing a specialist every two weeks since all that happened, Mr. Mason," said Will. "I've felt fine, but everything that happened really worried my Mom so I started seeing the specialist to ease her mind. She doesn't need stress in her condition."

"That's good to hear, Will, but you should be doing that stuff for yourself as much as you're doing it for your mother. I do want to discuss something else with you and I'm pretty sure you know what it is."

"You think we might be rushing?"

Mr. Mason nodded. "You two got engaged a month after she moved there when the plan was to stay at your place until she found a place of her own."

"Fair enough," said Will. "The thought that we might be rushing did occur to us, for what it's worth. And I know how much she hates it when guys tell women that they aren't like all the other girls, but she isn't. She's always herself around me and I'm always myself around her. I didn't have that with other girls I dated. The feelings we had for each other in high school never went away. We know we want to spend our lives together, so we just decided to make it official. Besides, the wedding isn't until next year anyway."

"What if she gets an opportunity somewhere other than Chicago? Are you willing to move?"

"Yeah, I am. But neither of us is interested in moving back to

Hawkins."

"I know that, Will. My wife was under the impression that our daughter took the job in Chicago to follow you there-"

"Julie's never been the type to take a job just to follow me," said Will. "I wouldn't want her to do that."

"I know," said Mr. Mason. "If she was just following you, she would have gone to North Western, even though she'd wanted to go to Miami University for as long as she could remember. Julie never felt like she fit in here when she was growing up and from what I could tell, you didn't feel that way either."

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"Stephen!" said Eleven as she opened the door to greet her cousin.

"Sorry to just drop in on you, El. I wanted to talk to you about something and figured. it was best to do it in person."

"Is something wrong?" asked Eleven as she gestured for Stephen to come in.

"Nothing's wrong. I was just reading over some of your research. You're doing great work and I wanted to offer you a job."

"Job?"

"Yes. We're still trying to figure out this whole MKUltra effect. Most of the records were destroyed in 1973, but there were a lot more test subjects than we realized. Plenty of them had children and many of those children have abilities, or like your brother Jonathan are carriers and could have children with abilities. I want to help all those children and protect them from being exploited by people who like to use phrases like 'by any means necessary' and 'for the greater good' to justify committing atrocities."

"People like Brenner," said Eleven who had stopped calling him 'Papa.' Stephen nodded. "What's the job?"

"Heading up research. We know very little about this whole thing.

Some people have theorized that the MKUltra effect could stop manifesting in a few generations, but the fact that your brother's children have the active gene when he's a potential seems to contradict that theory."

"You've already tested baby Edmund?" asked Eleven.

"Yes, a few hours after he was born," said Stephen. "I think you could do some good research on helping parents prepare their children for dealing with their abilities when they manifest."

"Mike and I want kids," said Eleven. "Is it possible for them to have happy lives?"

"I think so," said Stephen. "You can help yourself and others protect gifted children. Dr. Owens did a lot of research on this before he died. I think you're the best person to continue his work."

"And Will? Is he going to be alright?"

"I have every reason to believe he'll be fine. We'll always want to take steps to make sure he continues to be alright," said Stephen. "But we've discussed that several times in the past few months. Is there something particular on your mind today?"

"It's just that I read over Dr. Owens' files that you let me borrow and all of the male children that he and the others kidnapped died," said Eleven. "Will needed heart surgery after everything, but I've never had any long term health problems. And now I'm worried about my nephew and any other male children any of us may have."

"Yeah, the physical and mental Brenner and the others put children through was apparently fatal to the male children and we only have theories right now, but I think that your brother's health problems were a result of being stuck in the toxic environment of Upside Down for a week. Owens and several others seemed to make the same conclusion. The fact that he survived that place shows just how strong he is. As for the male test subjects who died, well it was the torture, not their abilities that was fatal. So your brother, your nephew and any other children that any of you have will be fine. I'm going to do everything in my power to ensure that."



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"Are you okay, Mom?" asked Will as he helped her out of the cab outside of Jonathan and Nancy's building. Nancy had giving birth to her second child-Barbara now had a little brother- a few days earlier and the Byers-Hopper family was visiting them for the weekend. Karen Wheeler had immediately flown to New York to stay with Nancy for a couple weeks.

"I'm fine, Baby," said Joyce. Julie took Joyce's arm as Will grabbed their bags from the trunk and paid the driver. The cab with Eleven, Mike, and Hopper pulled up behind them. "Will, honey, don't strain yourself."

"It's three light weight bags and we're taking an elevator up; don't worry, Mom," said Will as Eleven ran up to the front door and called up to Jonathan on the intercom so he could buzz them in.

They were greeted by a beaming Jonathan when they got up to the apartment. "Hey, how was the flight?" he asked as he stood aside for everyone to get inside.

"Grandma Joyce!" Barbara squealed as she ran to Joyce.

"Hey, sweetheart!" said Joyce as she scooped up her granddaughter.

"Take it easy, Barbara," said Karen as she came out of the kitchen. The apartment was filled with the aroma of her cooking. "Your Grandma Joyce just had a long trip."

"It's alright, Karen," said Joyce.

Jonathan put his hand on Barbara's arm. "Ready to introduce everyone to your little brother?" Barbara grinned and nodded. Jonathan gestured for everyone to follow to the living room. Nancy was resting on the sofa with a small cradle next to her. Jonathan reached in and gently lifted up the newborn.

"Everyone, meet Edmund William Michael Byers."

"So you named the poor kid after his two uncles," Hopper remarked with a twinkle in his eyes. Joyce managed to elbow him even though

she was still holding Barbara. The toddler giggled.

"Hey, Jonathan wouldn't do that to his own son," said Will. "Michael and William are both very common names!"

"How about we let everyone hold him before he gets fussy," said Nancy.

"Ladies first," said Jonathan as he handed Edmund to Eleven. "Here's your aunt."

"He's perfect," said Eleven. She silently vowed to look after her nephew and niece. She wondered what their abilities would be. Stephen had theorized that abilities ran in the family.

A timer went off in the kitchen. "I'll get that," said Karen. Dinner will be ready soon."

"You've been a godsend this week, Karen," said Jonathan.

"I'll help you, Mom," said Mike. He quickly hugged Nancy before following his mother. He saw Joyce handing Barbara to Hopper before taking baby Edmund from Eleven out of the corner of his eye.

Karen pulled the vegetables from the refrigerator and put them in the steamer. "I've mostly got everything finished, Mike. Could you just set the table?"

"Yeah, no problem, Mom," said Mike. He grabbed the plates from the cupboard and put them on the table. There was an awkward silence and mother and son worked.

Karen had felt a distance with her children for a long time. Nancy and Mike had both left home years ago without looking back. Holly was her last baby, but she had been eagerly looking forward to leaving for years. It would be another year before Holly went off to school and Karen had tried multiple times to talk her into going to school locally, but to no avail. She could sometimes talk to Anne Mason about wanting her grown children to return home as Anne was in a similar situation with Julie, but at least Anne's two older children had moved back to Hawkins after finishing school.

Karen and her husband barely spoke. They had barely had any conversations their entire marriage when Karen thought about it. Ted had given her the comfortable home she'd wanted, but Karen was left feeling empty after all those years.

"Are you sure you and El won't reconsider about having the wedding in Hawkins?" asked Karen. Mike sighed and continued placing the silverware next to the plates.

"I'm sorry, Mom, Hawkins just isn't our home anymore. Pretty much everyone we cared about has gone somewhere else... present company excluded of course. And we have a life and friends in Chicago."

Karen who felt a little slighted spoke before she could stop herself. "Friends like that Tucker?"

Fortunately Mike was was holding some napkins and not anything breakable at that moment. He clenched it at the memory of Tucker trying to kill Will and Eleven. "Not everyone we've met has been amazing, but we fit in better there than we ever did in Hawkins. And it looks like you don't need my help in here anymore, so I'm going to go out and see my new nephew."

Mike started to leave and Karen grabbed his arm. "Mike, wait. I'm sorry, that was out of line. I just...worry about you."

"Worry about me?"

"Yes, well, creating video games may be fun for you and Will while you're in you twenties, but you'll both be starting families soon. You can't spent your lives living out childhood fantasies."

Mike pried Karen's hand off of his arm. "Look, Mom, I know I'm not doing what you wanted me to do, but I happen to love my job. Will and I are really good at what we do. You may not like it, but we're making a career out of it. I'm sorry that I'm such a disappointment to you!"

"Michael, you're not a disappointment! Please, let's talk," said Karen.

"I can't do this, not here, not now," said Mike. "Look, Mom, if we keep

going with this conversation, I'm going to say something I'll regret. I don't want to hurt you, alright?"

"Alright," Karen sighed.

"It smells great. I do miss your cooking," said Mike. He kissed his mother on the cheek and went back to the living room. After another 15 minutes, the timer on the stove went off. Karen put the beef tenderloin, potatoes and vegetables into the serving dishes and went the living room to let everyone know dinner was ready.

"We'd be borrowing our boss' boat," said Will. "Representing him, actually."

"That sounds like a lot of fun," said Hopper. "I always wanted to do something like the Chicago Yacht Club race when I was younger, but never got around to it."

"You seem to be living pretty exciting lives," said Jonathan.

"I hear Mackinac Island is gorgeous in the summer," said Nancy. "You guys seem to be really getting around."

"Yeah, I think we've taken more trips in the last couple of years than my entire childhood," said Will.

"I'm sorry I didn't take you more places. All of you really deserved better than what you got," said Joyce.

"It wasn't your fault we didn't go on more vacations, Mom," said Will. "You gave us better things than vacation. You always supported our dreams."

"I second that," said Jonathan.

"You guys are going on some boat race?" asked Karen. "Isn't that dangerous? What about Will's heart condition?"

"It's fine, Mom," said Nancy as she noticed that Mike looked annoyed as Will squirmed. "They know what they're doing."

"Okay, well dinner's ready," said Karen. Their grown children seemed

perfectly at ease talking to Joyce all the time. The one thing Karen had over Joyce was her cooking. It may not have been enough to get Nancy and Mike back to Hawkins for more visits, but it was what she had.

"I am absolutely convinced that Rhaegar and Lyanna are Jon Snow's parents," said Will as everyone sat at the table eating dinner. The topics of conversation that evening had included Mike and Will's latest video game that they were designing so multiple players could interact online, Buffy, X-Files, the upcoming Star Wars prequels, and Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone- a book that a college friend of Julie's who worked at a publishing company in England had emailed her about it coming out in June.

"No way," said Nancy. "It has to be Ned and Ashara. Ned telling Catelyn to never asked about Jon's mother when she mentioned the rumors about Ashara was confirmation!"

"He just doesn't trust Catelyn enough to give her any clues," said Will. "They made the point of Robert going down to Lyanna's statue and saying he wants to destroy every last Targaryen. That in combination of the fact that children being in danger triggers Ned's memories of Lyanna saying 'promise me' is George RR Martin practically hitting us over the head with Jon's parentage."

"Triggered," said Eleven.

"What?" said Will.

"Triggered, Ned lost his head, so him having any memories is past tense," said Eleven.

"Good point, El," said Will as he grinned at his sister.

"I can't believe you kids have me reading that shit-sorry, Barbara: stuff, Grandpa Hopper said a naughty word," said Hopper. Barbara giggled in her high chair while everyone but Karen laughed. "I really can't believe that I actually like it. Never thought I'd read a novel that long. I think Ned and Ashara could be Jon Snow's parents."

"Steve and Dustin think so too," said Jonathan.

"Steve Harrington?" said Hopper. "Okay, then Rhaegar and Lyanna must be Jon's parents."

"The next book comes out next year," said Will. "If it's as long as 'A Game of Thrones,' I'm sure we'll know the answer by the end."

"This is some new book you're all reading?" asked Karen.

"Yeah, it's pretty good," said Nancy.

"You're reading this too, Nancy?" asked Karen. "Since when have you liked the sort of books your brother and his friends read?"

"I've always liked it, Mom. I just didn't admit it in high school. But I was always reading those kinds of books, remember?"

Karen looked surprised. Mike remembered Nancy loving fantasy books and movies, but not admitting it to her classmates who weren't Barb. Mike wondered if his mother was aware that Holly liked that kind of stuff as well. "So there's a character with secret parentage?" asked Karen.

"Yeah," said Eleven. "There's also a princess with three baby dragons and another girl who likes to fight with swords instead of wearing stupid dresses."

"Oh," said Karen. Mike noticed his mother rolling her eyes as she started to clear the table. "It sounds.. interesting."

Mike felt annoyed with his mother and hoped that no one else noticed her rolling her eyes. He resisted the urge to say that he thought the Harlequin romances she liked to read were stupid and pointless. It wasn't worth getting angry, but it was a reason that Mike never felt he could make small talk with his own mother like Will did with Joyce. Growing up, Mike had always noticed how his mother rolled her eyes at the things he enjoyed like D&D campaigns or Star Wars. She couldn't understand what it had meant to Mike that Will had found his old toys for sale on ebay and gotten them as a birthday present for Mike. To Karen, they were just old toys.

Karen hadn't understood why Mike had started hanging out at Will's house so much once Joyce had gotten a job with better hours,

thinking it was simply about Eleven. Sure, Eleven had a lot to do with it, but there was more. Mike had always wished that his parents had supported his interests the way that Joyce had supported Will and Jonathan's interests. The Wheelers had always wanted their children to be "normal." Joyce had simply wanted her children to be themselves. Mike had watched over the years as Joyce took a genuine interest in Will's art and Jonathan's photography. He had seen Joyce show kindness to Eleven even before finding out Eleven was her daughter.

Mike didn't think his mother was a terrible person or anything. She had always tried to be a good and caring mother and she was good with the big picture stuff. The little things was where she felt short of Joyce. While he and the others helped clear the table after dinner, Mike noticed Barbara reaching for Joyce as Karen picked her up. Karen looked a little taken aback, but Mike felt that Barbara already saw what he had been seeing for years in her young age. He wanted to talk to his mother about why he felt the way he did, but he wouldn't have that conversation for another thirteen years.

## 10. Chapter 10 Confronting Karen

### Chapter 10

August 1997

"Will, wake up!" said Julie as she roughly shook his shoulder. Will's eyes shot open. He sat up and looked around the room as he took some calming breaths. The Upside Down and the Mind Flayer were gone. He was in his own bedroom and there was a nice summer morning breeze drifting in through the open window.

"I'm sorry," said Will as he rubbed his eyes. He had been apologizing to her for his nightmares since they were fourteen years old. She did what she always had done and wrapped her arms around him.

"It's alright. I just wish I could magically make everyone's nightmares go away," said Julie and she caressed the back of Will's head. She was aware of the nightmares that Mike and Eleven had as well. While she couldn't fully understand what Will went through in the Upside Down or what Eleven went through in the lab, she could certainly relate to Mike's fear of something happening to Will or Eleven.

Will hugged Julie back. The child in him was crying out for his mother. "That's just silly," Will muttered.

"Huh?" asked Julie.

"Nothing," said Will. "I just keep hearing the voice of my twelve year old self crying out for my mother."

"We could go over and see her and Hopper," said Julie.

"I don't want to bother her."

"Like she'd ever consider that bothering."

"They won't even be up for a couple hours," said Will as he glanced at the alarm clock and noticed it was just a little after 7 am.

"So we'll keep ourselves busy for a couple hours," said Julie. She



hopped out of bed and walked over to the closet where she grabbed a bag of art supplies they'd purchased the day before. They had to put it in the closet to keep their cats from jumping into it. "We may as well get started on these."

"Good idea," said Will. "We can finish them and get them mailed out before certain people can object."

"My thoughts exactly," said Julie, who was annoyed with her mother and aunts trying to micromanage every detail of her wedding. She and Will had been annoyed with the snooty attitudes of most of the wedding vendors. Mike and Eleven felt the same way when planning their own wedding.

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Mike and Eleven walked out into the living room about 90 minutes later. The sofa had a tarp draped over it and Will and Julie had paint all over their faces, arms and legs. Mike smiled and shook his head.

"You two still can't help yourselves, can you?" asked Mike.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Will.

"Are these wedding invitations?" asked Eleven as she noticed a few dozen cards with paint drying on the coffee table. She recognized her brother's artwork. She and Mike had gone on a day trip to meet his parents in West LaFayette the day before and hadn't gotten back until late the night before.

"Yeah, well, we didn't like any of those uppity vendors, so..." said as he indicated the cards.

"We don't like them either," said Eleven. "They think they're royalty or something."

"Do you two think you could make our invitations?" asked Mike. "We could pay you."

"You wouldn't have to pay us," said Will. He quickly glanced at Julie.

"Yeah, we like doing this. It relieves the stress of wedding planning,"

said Julie.

"Mike and I could stuff the envelopes and clean up," said Eleven. Will glanced at his watch.

"Speaking of cleaning up, Julie and I were about to go visit Mom and Hopper."

"Is everything alright?" asked Mike.

"It's fine, I just had another nightmare last night and it gave me the overwhelming urge to see my mother," said Will.

"Is that all?" asked Eleven. Will nodded.

"That's all." Mike, Will, and Eleven had all just started being completely honest with each other about how their nightmares were affecting them. It helped with Eleven's research and there was no point to hiding things.

"Before you go," said Mike. "There's something I wanted to show you." Mike went to the kitchen and grabbed a brochure out of a drawer. He handed it to Will, who still had some dry paint caked on his hands.

"I've seen the site where they're breaking ground, it's not far from here," said Will as he looked over the information about a new subdivision.

"They won't be finished until 2000, but the floor plans look great," said Mike. "If we decide to go there, we can always stay here until the houses are finished and set aside money for everything in the mean time." Mike tried not to push too hard. He wanted to keep his best friend nearby, but didn't want to push Will too hard. Mike knew how annoyed his was with his own mother for trying to push him to move back to Hawkins.

Will glanced at Julie. "It seems like a good option if the builders have everything up to code, and we would have to worry about the problems of older houses."

"We'd have three years to make up our minds. We can think about it," said Will.

Mike and Eleven cleaned with the art supplies as Will and Julie showered and got ready to walk (as they usually did when the weather was nice) to visit Joyce and Hopper. On their way out, they grabbed the wedding invitation they'd personally made for Will's parents.

Will and Julie had written the names of the guest on the invitations before painting them, so Mike and Eleven were able to start addressing the envelopes and stuffing them as the paint dried. Mike smiled fondly as he noticed that Will had drawn for D&D related pictures on the invitations for Dustin, Lucas, and their other nerdy friends.

"Did you get a chance to read over that research I did with Stephen yet?" Eleven asked Mike.

"I did," said Mike. "I don't completely understand all of it and I have some questions, but it looks possible that we'll be just fine."

"So you still want to have kids?" asked Eleven.

"Well, yeah," said Mike. "You, Will, and Sarah have turned out pretty awesome. Jane and Kali are doing well. So far, Barbara and Edmund are fine. We'd have to make sure that psychos don't get anywhere near them, but your cousin is helping with that."

"I know, but it won't be easy. We'll be scared for them all time like my Mom was with me and Will."

"Your Mom is still glad that you exist, even after everything that happened to your family-non of which was your fault, by the way. And your Mom didn't know what had happened to her and had no idea that evil scientist would be after her super-powered kids. We have knowledge that she didn't. I know it won't be easy, El, but it'll be worth it."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Eleven seemed satisfied with that. She and Mike had discussed what their lives could be and the trials they could face a million times. She

just needed to know that he understood everything. As much as she trusted that Mike loved her and would stick with her, she still feared losing him.

"Your Mom is on her way up."

"What? We were just there yesterday. Why is she coming up?"

"I know you're still angry with her, but she's your mother. You have to work things out or you'll regret it, Mike."

Mike focused on checking the names on the envelopes with the names on the guest list. "We should probably get these to the post office."

"Mike-

"Look, we'll talk about this and I'll try to talk to my Mom when she gets here, I just can't talk about it right now."

"Okay," said Eleven as she neatly stacked the envelopes and put them into a shoe box.

"She got angry and said I love you and Will more than I love my own flesh and blood."

"She's just dealing with empty nest fears," said Eleven.

"The thing is, it's true," said Mike. "It's always been true. Considering the fact that we're getting married, I'm supposed to love you more than anyone else so I'm doing that part right. I was just never that close to my parents. I'm close to my sisters; but Will, Dustin, and Lucas were always more like family to me than my parents."

"I know," said Eleven. "Your dad was sleeping all the time when I was there... unless he was watching TV and your Mom was usually talking on the phone or cooking or reading. They need to make some effort too."

A few weeks earlier, everyone (including Jonathan, Nancy and their children) was visiting Hawkins. Karen had gotten frustrated when they were talking about Barbara starting to exhibit telekinetic

abilities and yelled at the entire Byers family. She accused them of dragging her children and new her grand children into their mess. She had particularly directed her anger at Will and Joyce saying that she should have never let Mike be friends with Will after all the trouble Joyce had caused in school.

Mike became even more angry than ever at his mother for that incident, even though she immediately apologized. Will and Eleven always blamed themselves for any time Mike was in danger. Mike certainly didn't blame them. He was angry at his mother for bringing those fears to the surface again.

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Eleven had talked her parents into getting a dog that summer. They had been dogless for a few years since Chester and later buttons had died. Will and Eleven had taken back their cats, Luke and Leia.

"Shut up you dumb dog, it's just Will and Julie," said Hopper to the mutt as he came to the door and held it's collar so Will and Julie could enter. "You don't have to knock, you know."

"It's a habit," said Will as he hugged Hopper.

"Hey, sweetheart," said Joyce happily as she came out of her room to see why the dog (Spud) was barking. She hugged Will. "To what do we owe the pleasure this morning?"

"I-uh-well..." Will stammered.

"Spud looks like he could use a walk," said Julie. "And it's a really nice morning. What do you say, Hopper?"

Hopper glanced at Will. "Sure, why not." He grabbed Spud's leash and gestured for Julie to follow.

"What is it, Baby?" asked Joyce as they walked to the living room and sat on the sofa. She have never quite lost the habit of calling her youngest child "Baby" even as he became a fully grown adult.

"There's nothing to worry about," said Will. "I just had another nightmare last night and woke up with the urge to see you, that's all."

"Oh. Well you know I'm always glad to see you," said Joyce as she hugged him. "What was it about?"

"The usual: the Upside Down, Demogorgan and the Mind Flayer. I know they're all gone, but the dreams still feel real while they're happening."

"I know they do," said Joyce as she held her son tighter. "Hey, your aunt Phyllis visited Jonathan and Nancy last week. She mailed some pictures. Edmund is growing so fast. Would you like to see them?" Joyce asked after a couple minutes. Joyce's sister Phyllis had been living in Long Island with her husband for years. She had started visiting Jonathan and Nancy on a regular basis since Joyce had reached out to her.

"Yeah, that'd be great," said Will. Joyce got up and grabbed an envelope from the cabinet. "I'm glad you're reconnecting with Aunt Phyllis and Aunt Pam."

"I didn't realize how much I missed them," said Joyce as she took some pictures from the envelope and handed them to Will. "We were close as kids, just like you were with Jonathan and El. It feels good to reconnect with them." Joyce stared at her hands as Will began looking through the pictures. He noticed her posture out of the corner of his eye.

"What is it, Mom? Is something wrong?" asked Will. Joyce shook her head and took one of his hands into hers.

"When we visited her in New York last May, Phyllis said that if she didn't know any better, she'd think that El was my biological daughter."

"Well, she is," said Will. "And she does look like us."

"I told Phyllis and Pam than El is my daughter in every way that matters, but..."

"You want to tell them the whole truth," said Will. Joyce nodded.

"It's risky, but I trust my sisters and El has always wanted to know more about her extended family. Phyllis and Pam could help with

that."

"If you think you can trust them, I say tell them," said Will. "Talk to El about it first, but it could be good for them to know."

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"He had another nightmare last night, didn't he?" asked Hopper after glancing around to make sure no one was listening.

"It's that obvious?" asked Julie.

"I saw it enough times when he was growing up," said Hopper. "With Will and his sisters. I'm just glad he's gotten into the habit of talking to his mother when something's bothering him."

"You're the one who got him into that habit," said Julie. "I'm glad you did. He thinks the world of you, you know."

"Feeling's mutual," said Hopper with a smile. "He's a damn good kid, always has been. Your parents know that, whether they admit it or not. Is everything going alright with them?"

"My Dad has accepted that I'm not going back to Hawkins and I think my Mom will eventually. She still thinks I'm rushing into things because I'm marrying my high school sweetheart. I'm not sure she sees the irony in that statement yet."

Hopper laughed. "I remember your parents getting married a year out of high school."

"Exactly," said Julie.

"I'm sure a couple of grand children will make them come around," said Hopper with a wink.

"Well, that'll happen when it happens," said Julie.

"I can't wait," said Hopper. "I'll be the cool grandpa... or the crazy grandpa... one of the two. Good God, Spud, what did you eat!" Hopper pulled out a plastic bag as his dog squatted.

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Karen knocked on the door as Joyce, Will, Hopper, and Julie were finishing their lunch. She and Holly were in town for the dress fittings that afternoon.

"Hey, Mrs. Wheeler," said Will as he opened the door. He smiled warmly at Holly. "Hey, Holly. Come on in." Will stepped aside as they entered. Karen noticed that Will seemed uneasy with her. It was painful for her to see as she'd known Will pretty much his entire life and he'd spent a lot of time at her house when he was growing up.

"Listen Will, I just want to apologize again for what I said last week," said Karen. Joyce quickly went to Will's side and held his arm.

"Don't worry about it. A lot happened earlier this year. A lot happened years ago. It's had us all on edge for a long time."

There was an awkward silence. Karen opened a box of home made peanut butter cookies. "I baked these yesterday. They were always your favorite, Will."

Will felt a surge of anger. Since he was a small child, he had always hated it when people made gestures like cookies after saying something cruel to him. It went back to the days when his parents were still married and Lonnie insulted Will and the things he like, then tried to make some sort of gesture to save face in front of Joyce and everyone else. Those gestures always felt empty to Will. While he believed that Karen was genuinely sorry for blaming Will for everything that had happened to Mike and Nancy, he felt that she had meant what she said. "Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler, but I'm still full from lunch." Joyce nudged him with her elbow. "On second thought." Will grabbed a cookie.

"We've gotta pick up everyone from the train station in an hour," said Julie.

"That's right, we'd better get going," said Will.

"Mind if I tag along?" asked Holly.

"Of course not," said Will. "I'll see you in a bit, Mom. You too,



Hopper. I know it'll be rough, but you'll have to put on a tux this afternoon."

"I'll do it for your sake, kid, and your sister's as well," said Hopper.

"How about one for the road, Julie?" said Karen as she held up the cookie box. Julie glanced at Will and Joyce and took a cookie.

"Thanks," she muttered. Joyce nudged Will again and he took a bite of the cookie.

"Just as good as I remember," said Will. He, Julie, and Holly went outside. Will spit the bit of cookie in to the dumpster and tossed the cookie in. Julie followed. "Sorry, Holly, I know your mom's trying."

"It's alright, I get it," said Holly. "She's been getting on my nerves a lot lately. She's trying to guilt me into going to college closer to home, but that only makes me want to go far away from Hawkins even more."

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"Can I get you something to drink, Karen?" asked Joyce. Hopper busied himself with Spud.

"No, I'm fine," said Karen as she sat on the sofa. Joyce sat down as well. "Look, I just, I just want to make things right. I wish I hadn't said what I said last week. I've just been going through a lot with all of my children leaving and my grand daughter nearly getting murdered six months ago."

"Karen, I haven't forgotten all those times you helped me out when the kids were growing up. I'll always be grateful for that. For the sake of our children and mutual grand children, we can move on from last week, but don't ever talk to Will like that again."

"Again, Joyce, I've just been worrying about my children being in danger."

"Tell you what, Karen, if you want to take your frustration on someone, take it out on me. I'm the one who was in the wrong place in the wrong time when I was fourteen years old."

"That isn't what I meant," said Karen hastily.

"Oh, I think it is," said Joyce. "You know what? That's fine. I might feel the same way if I was in your shoes, but I'm the freak with the freak children."

"You and your children aren't freaks," said Karen.

"Oh, but we are," said Joyce. "We are and we're fine with that. Nancy and Mike have always been fine with that. I've been grateful that Will had a friend who cared about him as much as Mike always as and that El has someone who loves her as much as Mike does; and that Jonathan has Nancy in his life. Mike and Nancy have risked a lot by being in our lives and I know it's difficult for you, so take it out on me, not my children."

"You're right, Joyce. The MKUltra stuff that has happened to your family isn't your fault. I'm scared for Mike and Nancy, but I'm also proud of them for being good friends. We can't do anything about the abilities that our grand children will likely inherit, but what about that video game nonsense?"

"It isn't nonsense to Mike and Will," said Joyce.

"It's a silly childhood fantasy," said Karen. "As bright as Will is, surely you want him to do something more meaningful than the same juvenile stuff they did when they were ten. I know I want something better for Michael."

"I want them to be happy. What they do is meaningful to them. They had a dream and made it happen. Do you have any idea how rare that is? And they happen to be really good at what they do. It takes a lot of hard work to design those games."

"So I take it you won't help me try to talk some sense into them?"

"They have plenty of sense already," said Joyce. "I you want to fix your relationship with Mike, try accepting that he's an adult making his own choices. I know it's hard, but it's worth it."

"That's easy for you to say, Joyce, your children have never resented you. And they live just down the street while my children moved out

of state."

"First of all, Karen, there have been plenty of times my children resented me. I had to work long hours just to make ends meet when Will and Jonathan were little. They didn't always understand. Jonathan got a job of his own when he was old enough and had to help out more than he ever should have. After Will went missing, I practically smothered him and he thought I was treating him like a baby. And my children all went to school out of state as well. I only live near Will and El now because I got sick and they moved me up here for some experimental treatment."

"Sorry, Joyce, I.."

"Don't worry about it, Karen."

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"I can't believe you guys let your girlfriends pick out the tuxes," said Dustin as he looked in the mirror.

"We aren't supposed to see the dresses before the weddings," said Will. "Besides, we have terrible taste in formal wear."

"Yeah, do you guys really want to wear clothes that we picked out," asked Mike.

"That's a solid argument," said Lucas.

"Steve has designed some great hair products. He ended up being good at chemistry," said Dustin. "You guys should use it on your wedding days. You need all the help you can get."

"Could it hold my hair in a messy position?" asked Will. "Julie likes it that way."

"It totally can," said Dustin.

"Sold!" said Will. He attempted to knot his tie. "I wonder if this comes in clip on."

"You're hopeless, kid," said Hopper as he helped Will with the tie. "I

taught you all kinds of car maintenance, but failed to teach you a simple knot."

"It runs in the family," said Jonathan as he rocked Edmund's car seat.

"We just haven't gone to many events that required formal wear," said Mike.

"We've gotten away with not wearing ties most of the time," said Will.

"Any plans for your bachelor parties?" asked Dustin.

"We're thinking New York for both of them," said Will. "Randy here has the hook up in some of the best clubs."

"You know it," said Randy. "I know some great arcades as well."

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"Oh, Sweetheart, you look so beautiful," said Joyce with tears in her eyes as Eleven stepped out in her satin dress.

"Do you think Mike will like it?" asked Eleven.

"You could wear a garbage bag and Mike would love it," said Holly. "But that's a gorgeous dress."

"It really is," said Nancy. "You have great taste, El. I love the dress you picked out for Barbara as well. We'll probably have to get this altered before the wedding the way she's growing."

"We'll have to alter a few of the dresses," said Max as she indicated her growing baby bump as she wore one of the bridesmaid dresses

Julie stepped out wearing her own dress. She had gone the simple, yet elegant look, just like Eleven had.

"OOOOhhhh!" said Jennifer in delight. "I love it."

"It's a very pretty dress, honey," said Mrs. Mason. "But we can get a dress with a train if you like."

"Thanks, Mom, but I'm going to be in the dress for several hours and I

want to be comfortable. Besides, as clumsy as I am, I'd probably trip and fall on a train."

"I think it's the perfect dress for you," said Tina. "And these bridesmaid dresses are both elegant and comfortable."

"Would you like to see how the veils look with the dress?" asked Mrs. Mason.

"I actually decided not to wear a veil," said Julie. "There are a lot of nice silk flowers I can put in my hair."

"What? The veil is one of the most important things for a bride," said Mrs. Mason.

"They all squeeze my head too much and I just don't like veils," said Julie.

"I don't think I want a veil either," said Eleven. "The whole thing with the groom lifting the bride's veil is archaic."

"Archaic," Barbara repeated.

"What do you think, Karen?" asked Mrs. Mason. "I haven't heard you say anything since we got here. Surely you think they should wear veils."

"I do," said Karen. "But it's their weddings and we should respect their choices."

Everyone seemed stunned at Karen's words. She had been trying to push for certain decisions in Mike and Eleven's wedding since they had announced their engagement. She had done the same when Jonathan and Nancy got married, pushing them into having their wedding in Hawkins when they wanted to have it in New York.

Eleven finally broke the silence. "Thank you." Joyce had her hands on Eleven's shoulders and gave Karen an encouraging nod. Respecting a decision she didn't agree with was a good first step toward reconciliation.

## 11. Chapter 11 Mike and El's Wedding

### Chapter 11

April 1998

"I'm glad to see you have a husband who's good with children," said Pam as she watched Hopper putting on a Jim Croce record and dance for a giggling Barbara. Joyce smiled as she rocked Edmund in her arms.

"I'm glad my sisters are here," said Joyce. She wiped some tears from her eyes as she looked at Barbara.

"What's wrong, Joycy?" asked Phyllis as she rubbed her younger sister's back.

"Nothing," said Joyce hastily.

"Joyce," said Pam. "We have almost 30 years of catching up to do. What's on your mind, spill it."

"It's just... this little guy here-" Joyce indicated Edmund. "reminds me so much of his father and his uncle when they were little. I see Barbara over there and wonder if that's what El would have been like if she'd been with us. She should have been with us."

"We should have gone right back to Hawkins to check on you when Lonnie kept insisting you didn't want to talk to us every time we called," said Phyllis.

"I could have made more of an effort to call you," said Joyce.

"We shouldn't have left you alone to take care of Mom and Dad on your own when they got sick either," said Pam.

"That was over thirty years ago," said Joyce. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Does El have something old to wear to her wedding yet?" asked Phyllis.

"We really haven't done that yet, why?"

Phyllis got up and grabbed a small box from her suitcase. She opened it up and handed it to Joyce. There was a silver necklace with an old pendant that had a blue rose painted on it. "I remember this," said Joyce. "It was Mom's."

"Yeah, and before that, it was Grandma's," said Phyllis. "I thought El could wear it for her wedding."

"I think she'd love that," said Joyce. "Why don't you give it to her and tell her about Mom and Grandma. She loves hearing about family history."

"You have her dress here, don't you?" asked Pam.

"Yes," said Joyce. "Would you like to see it."

"I would," said Pam. "El can borrow this broach if it goes with her dress."

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"Max is really tearing up the dance floor," said Dustin. "And she's pulled El into her dancing."

"It's her second time really getting out since the baby was born," said Lucas. Their first child had been born shortly before Christmas. Max had been excited to go to Eleven's bachelorette party and the wedding party's pre-wedding get together. "She and El have a lot of catching up to do."

Jennifer (followed by Cathy) walked over and placed two drinks in front of Will and Julie. "What are these?" asked Julie.

"Long Island Ice Teas," said Jennifer. "Now drink up, both of you. Cathy and I just signed everyone up for a bunch of songs and you two are going to have to really loosen up by 9:30 when the karaoke starts. Did you bring your camcorder, Jonathan?"

"Sure did," said Jonathan as he held up his bag. He hadn't taken it out yet because he was saving the battery and he was having a

conversation with Will.

"I signed the two of you up for three duets," said Cathy as she pointed at Steve and Dustin.

"I'll be sure to record those," said Jonathan.

"Be sure to hand the camera off to your brother when it's your turn," said Jennifer.

"What?" said Jonathan as he spit out his drink.

"It'll be fine," said Nancy.

"So, Dustin's been telling us you're a great baby sitter, Steve," said Will.

"His kids get along with my kids," said Steve. "I'm just glad he only has two. The little shits are a handful."

"Oh, we're going to work on doubling that number in about 11 months," said Dustin as Cathy took a seat next to him.

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"We've decided to try for twins next year," said Cathy. "But one will be born before midnight on December 31, 1999 and the other will be born just after midnight on January first, 2000." She gave Dustin a high five.

"That's right," Dustin said with a hiccup. "We'll have twins born in two different centuries. One will be the last baby born this century and the other will be the first baby born in the next. They'll be the Y2K twins."

"Well, I hope you achieve that goal," said Julie. Will saw Randy enter the bar with his boyfriend Trevor and waved them over.

"Hey, good to see you," said Will as he hugged Randy. Randy then hugged Julie, then Mike.

"There's the groom!" Randy noticed Eleven and Max on the dance



floor. "And it looks like the bride is the life of the party tonight."

"She certainly is," said Mike as he smiled fondly in Eleven's direction. "You must be Trevor," said Mike as he held out his hand.

"Nice to meet you," said Trevor.

"I don't want to cause a scene at your wedding Mike," said Randy. "So I won't tell anyone that Trevor and I are a couple if you don't want me to."

"You don't have to hide anything on my account," said Mike. "You're my friend and if anyone has a problem with it, they can kiss my ass."

"Hear, hear!" said Will as he held up his Long Island Ice Tea. When he took a drink, he nearly spit it out. "Holy shit, that's potent."

"That's the point," said Jennifer. "Now drink up so you're ready to sing."

"C'mon, Byers, don't tell me you've never had a Long Island Ice Tea before," said Dustin as Will and Julie struggled to finish the drinks Jennifer had gotten them.

"I haven't, actually," said Will.

"There you go, pretending you're so innocent," Dustin teased.

"He's got a point," said Lucas.

"He has no point whatsoever," Will argued playfully. "I can't help that my friends made assumptions about me based on private information that I kept private." He took Julie's hand. Mike suppressed a smile as he realized what his friends were talking about. Dustin and Lucas never quite let Will live that down. They never got over the fact that Will was the first party member to experience it either.

Mike grinned as Will dipped his fingers into his drink and flicked drops of Long Island Ice Tea at Dustin and Lucas.

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"You boys are all hopeless," said Hopper as he helped Will with his tie before helping Mike and Jonathan with theirs.

"We meant to learn," said Will. "Other things came up, that's all."

"Doesn't that company you work for require ties at formal events?" asked Hopper.

"Well, we make them a lot of money, so they don't really care," said Mike.

Will suddenly seemed to be responding to something that no one else heard. He started to leave the room.

"Hey, where are you going?" asked Mike. Will merely tapped his forehead and left the room. "El must be nervous about something. Do you think she's having second thoughts?"

"If she is, it took her long enough," said Dustin as he buttoned his cuff. "Maybe she decided she wants a guy who can tie a tie." Dustin lowered his voice. "Or a father-in-law who doesn't snore at her wedding." Dustin indicated Ted who was snoring in a chair in the corner of the room. Mike felt better than ever about not letting his parents guilt him into having the wedding in Hawkins.

Will knocked on the door of the bridal suite. His mother answered. "Hey sweetheart, your sister's a little anxious."

"I figured," said Will with a small smile. Eleven was surrounded by her bridesmaids as well as Mrs. Wheeler.

"Did Hopper help you out with your tie?" asked Joyce with a slightly amused expression as she tapped the knot.

"Yeah," said Will. "Looks great, doesn't it? Mike's looks even better," he added as he looked directly at his sister. Eleven, who was nervously tapping her foot smiled a little. Joyce gestured to the other women to follow her into the next room. Julie reached over and squeezed Will's hand as she passed him.

"Thanks," said Eleven. "I just... I needed to talk to you."

Will took a seat next to her. "What's on your mind?"

"I dunno. How's Mike? Is he nervous too?"

"Yeah. He just wants to make sure this day is going to be special for you."

"It will be. I've wanted to marry him for a long time... I just... I just don't want things to change. I mean, it was perfect-the three of us living together. It's still been perfect after Julie moved in with us, but it's all going to change."

Will sighed. He has suspected for a while that the reason his best friend and sister hadn't gotten married years earlier was that they somehow didn't want to let go of him. He'd even told them to their faces a year earlier. "It has been great, but I'm always going to be your brother. We'll always be in each other's lives, it'll just take more effort once we all move to our own places. Even that isn't happening for a couple years. You and Mike are going to start your own family and I'll be the awesome uncle that your kids run to when they're pissed at you. That's life, but it'll still be amazing."

"That's life for everyone else and we aren't like everyone else," said Eleven.

"No, we aren't," said Will. "That's a good thing because we won't grow apart like everyone else."

Eleven took Will's hand and smiled. "Promise?"

"Yes, I absolutely promise!"

Eleven seemed to be satisfied with that answer. "The flowers we planted in the court yard last week... It was a chilly night last night..."

"Say no more," said Will. "I got this." He stood up. "Are you ready to go out there and make Mike the happiest man who ever lived?" Eleven nodded.

Will walked out into the church courtyard to the reef of flowers he and he friends had planted a few days earlier. He casually leaned on the gazebo and held out his hand to redirect the sunlight. The droopy

flowers sprung back to life.

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"It's time for you to go, Barbara," Nancy urged her daughter after Joyce and Karen had been walked down the aisle and seated. Barbara smiled and started down the aisle. She has been fine, even excited at the rehearsal, but the church had been empty. When she saw over 100 strangers turn around and smile at her, she froze, then started crying.

Jonathan stepped out of the line of groomsmen and gestured for his daughter to walk toward him, but it was no use. She clearly was even less fond of being the center of attention than her father or uncle had been as children.

The group waiting in the back of the church looked at each other frantically trying to think about what to do.

"I'll be right back," said Hopper to Eleven. He hurried over to Barbara and knelt beside her. "Okay, shorty, I need you to take a deep breath. Can you do that for me?"

Barbara hiccuped and nodded. "Okay, breathe in and out," said Hopper as he rubbed her back.

"You ready to walk down this aisle to where your Daddy and uncles are standing?"

Barbara glanced at the people staring at her and shook her head.

"Okay, how about a compromise? I'll carry to your Dad and you can throw down the pedals so your Aunt El has a nice path to walk on. We can just pretend all these people aren't here. Deal?"

Barbara nodded. Hopper scooped her up and carried her as she dropped pedals. He handed her to Jonathan when he got to the front. He quickly patted Mike and Will on their arms before heading to the back of the church as the wedding guests broke into applause. He quickly squeezed a beaming Joyce's hand on the way. Steve, who was using Jonathan's camcorder managed to record the whole thing. At did the student videographer they had hired.

"That'll help make this day memorable," Will muttered to Mike as Nancy started making her way up the aisle. She was followed by Max, Holly, Julie, Cathy, and Sarah before Eleven walked down the aisle on Hopper's arm.

Mike tried his best to listen to the words of the minister, but his mind drifted to the vows he'd written himself. He planned on giving them to El later and in private. They heavily centered around how she'd come into his life and those details weren't exactly safe when most of the wedding guests didn't know the full truth.

Mike was aware of the music. It was played by some of Julie's students, led by Jennifer. Mike marveled at how good of a singer Randy was. He was glad that the music was provided by friends, rather than the professionally hired strangers. Before he knew it, Pastor Frank was pronouncing them husband and wife. El didn't wait for him to tell Mike to kiss the bride. She initiated the first kiss herself.

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"Have you decided what song you're going to dance to with Mom next month at your wedding?" El asked Will as she watched Mike dancing with Karen for the mother-son dance. She had just finished her father-daughter dance with Hopper.

"I have, actually," said Will.

"Oh, really?" said Joyce. "What did you choose, Baby?"

"Rainbow connection," said Will. "The original one, performed by Kermit himself."

Joyce squeezed Will's arm. "I love it."

"Me too," said Eleven. Mike had chosen one of Karen's favorite songs: Blue Moon. Eleven wasn't fond of her mother-in-law's taste in music. She didn't particularly care for Elvis. She suddenly remembered another song she didn't particularly like. She tugged on Will's arm.

"Will!"

"What's wrong, El?"

"I saw the Macarena in the DJ's collection. What if someone requests it?"

"Don't worry, I got this," said Will as he winked at his sister.

"As a retired cop, I can't condone stealing or destroying something," said Hopper. "Even if it's the Macarena."

"Don't worry. It's just going to be in a place where he can't find it until after the reception's over," said Will.

A server held out a tray of appetizers to Eleven. She really wanted one of the meatballs, but settled on a finger sandwich. She and the other members of the wedding party would be changing out of their formal wear shortly and she didn't want to get a stain on her dress.

Will tapped Dustin and Lucas on their shoulders and gestured for them to follow.

"What's up?" asked Dustin. "We aren't decorating the 'Just Married' car till later."

"It's not that. El saw the Macarena in the DJ's collection," said Will.

"Oh, shit!" said Lucas. "We need to do something."

"I have a plan," said Will. "Lucas, you start a conversation with the DJ. Dustin, you find the CD and signal me. Pull a couple other CDs from the rack and start looking through them. I'll turn invisible and take it from you. We just hide it until the end of the night. Ready?"

Dustin and Lucas nodded. They approached the DJ's table as Will casually leaned on the wall near a doorway. He watched as Lucas chatted with the DJ and Dustin ran his finger down the CD rack. He pulled a few out, pretending to look over the titles. Dustin briefly waved his hand. Will glanced around to make sure no one was looking at him. He then stepped back into the doorway and turned himself invisible.

Will walked over to Dustin and tapped his elbow. Dustin pulled the Macarena single slightly out of the pile and Will touched the CD, turning it invisible. He stuffed it in his pocket, walked back to the

doorway and became visible again, just as Dustin handed "Walk the Dinosaur" to the DJ. Will felt his nose and noticed that it wasn't bleeding, not even a little.

"Holy shit! That was so badass!" said Dustin as he slung one arm around Will and the other around Lucas. The three men laughed as they stumbled back over to their group of friends and family.

Mike, having just finished his dance with his and returned to Eleven's side as the wedding guests started doing the chicken dance.

"Mission accomplished," Will told his sister as he patted his pocket.

"I knew I could count on you," said Eleven as she hugged Will.

"What mission?" asked Mike with a small smile.

"We stole the Macarena from the DJ so he couldn't play it," said Lucas. "It was awesome."

"You guys stole the Macarena without me?" asked Mike as he stuck out his lower lip and pretended to pout.

Will pulled the CD out of his pocket and thrust it against Mike's stomach. "Remember, I'm getting married next month and you can return the favor."

Julie stepped behind Will, wrapped her arms around his waste and rested her chin on his shoulder. "That's a good point. We'd really appreciate you returning this favor."

Mike laughed and pocketed the CD. "Deal."

"I wish someone had stolen it when we got married," said Max as she took Lucas' arm.

"We didn't know then what we know now," said Dustin. "You guys got married just as it became law that it had to be played at every single wedding. Cathy and I were smart enough to get married before the song came out."

"So you guys are breaking the wedding laws now?" asked Cathy.

"Yep," said Dustin. "Because this wedding is badass! I mean El and Hopper danced to Jim Croce for their father-daughter dance instead of using some shitty ballad."

"That song is more special to me and my Dad than any shitty ballad will ever be," said Eleven.

As the Electric Slide started playing, Mike looked at his watch. "I think it's a good time for us to slip away and change into our more comfortable clothes. The guests are going to work up an appetite and riot if dinner isn't served soon."

"Agreed," said Eleven. The group all headed back to their rooms at the lodge. They passed Lucas' father going around to all the tables and happily showing off his new grandson. They also passed Dustin's mother showing off her two grand children. Eleven imagined her own children being shown off by her parents in the next few years.

"Hang on," said Mike as he opened the door and put his hand on Eleven's shoulder.

Mike glanced at Will and Julie entering their own room; as well as Dustin and Cathy, Lucas and Max, Nancy and Jonathan, Sarah, then Holly. When all the doors were closed, he scooped up Eleven into his arms and carried her into the room. "Some traditions can be fun."

"They sure can," said Eleven as he set her down and closed the door.

"I couldn't help myself," said Mike as he put the Macarena CD into a desk drawer for safe keeping.

"I thought I had picked out a simple dress," said Eleven as she struggled with the lacing.

"I don't think it exists," said Mike. "Here, I'll give you a hand."

Eleven felt relief and ecstasy as the dress loosened up. She had discussed with Julie and her mother several times in the past year about how they couldn't understand why brides usually stayed in their wedding gowns for the reception. She felt more strongly about that stance at that moment than ever. She wanted to have fun at her reception. She felt constricted in the dress.



Eleven removed all of the undergarments and nylons as well, deciding to put on her normal cotton ones for the rest of the evening. She slipped into her kimono while she washed off her make-up. She had never much cared for make-up and rarely wore it. Most of the women she'd grown close to over the years didn't care much for it either. She didn't like the excessive make-up she had to wear. It was mostly for the photos and Eleven couldn't help but think that she and her bridesmaids wouldn't have needed so much makeup if wedding photographers were as good at taking pictures as Jonathan.

Mike was carefully putting the dress into the bag and carefully placing the necklace Aunt Phyllis' necklace and Aunt Pam's broach into their velvet boxes. Eleven wondered if her own daughter would one day wear those pieces of jewelry at her wedding. She was determined that that daughter (or those daughters) would exist.

Eleven dried her face and started pulling all of the pins out of her hair and brushing it as Mike took off his own tuxedo and carefully put the jacket, tie, vest, shirt, and pants onto hangers. Eleven stood up, walked over to Mike and pulled him into a tender kiss. It was their first kiss alone together as husband and wife. It was their first time *\*alone\** together as husband and wife.

Eleven dropped her kimono to the floor. It was very comfortable compared to all the chafing, constricting articles of clothing she'd had to wear for the past several hours, but it still was too much fabric covering her skin.

She pulled Mike onto the bed and tugged at his boxers. He gently, but firmly put his hand on her wrist. "El, there are a lot of people waiting for us to get back to the reception."

Eleven leaned forward and nibbled on Mike's ear. "So? Let them wait."

Mike began to caress her back. "We aren't supposed to do this until tonight, after all the guests leave."

"Mike, we're going to be tired tonight. Besides: you carried me across the threshold."

"You're absolutely right," said Mike as he allowed Eleven to finish removing his boxers.

Although she and Mike had made love more times than she could count in the past decade, Eleven savored that moment. It was the first time they'd made love as husband and wife.

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"It's about damn time! What the hell took so long?" asked Dustin as Mike and Eleven approached the wedding party as they waited in the area outside of the reception hall. Everyone was in their more comfortable semi-formal clothes. Cathy nudged Dustin and pointed at Nancy and Jonathan who were covering Barbara's ears. "Sorry, I mean darn and heck!"

"We were sucking face," said Mike dryly. Eleven nudged him and Mike glanced at Barbara as Nancy gave him a pointed look. "Sorry, I meant we were washing our faces. Lot's of make-up on the wife here."

"I'm eager to hear the speeches from the best man and maid of honor," said Joyce as she indicated Will and Sarah.

"Speaking of that," said Will as he let go of Julie's hand and walked over to Mike and Eleven while pulling an envelope from his pocket. "This is the uncut edition of my best man speech. I can't exactly see everything I want to say in front of people who don't know the whole story."

Mike opened the envelope and he and Eleven began to skim over Will's word.

"Seriously, you guys?" said Dustin. "Everyone's already been waiting forever!"

"It's our day," said Eleven. "And we can do whatever we want. Besides, we're getting back at you for making us wait at your wedding."

Mike put the envelope in his pocket deciding to read it more thoroughly later. He pulled Will into a tight hug. "You're legally my brother now, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Yeah, I'm screwed," said Will lightly.

"Here's the full version of my speech," said Sarah as she handed an envelope to Eleven. "I obviously can't say everything either.

Eleven hugged Sarah. She glanced over Sarah's shoulder at her parents. She remembered hearing the saying 'blood is thicker than water' several times. She felt that love was thicker than blood. Although Sarah wasn't her biological sister, she felt that she was her real sister. She remembered Hopper rushing to help Barbara when she was frightened at the church that morning. Hopper had been Eleven's father in every way that mattered. He had been a father to her brothers as well and a grandfather to her niece and nephew. He would be a grandfather to the children she would have with Mike and the children Will would have with Julie.

Eleven had loved her own mother before learning she was her birth mother. She had loved her brothers as well before learning that Will was her twin. She knew that Mike and Will had always loved each other like brothers and they had loved Dustin and Lucas together. Even though everything had changed with her getting married, she knew that love would keep everyone in the room in her life.

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Mike and Eleven decided to watch some of Jonathan's footage before leaving for their honeymoon on Sunday evening. Early Sunday afternoon they sat in the living room with Jonathan, Will, Julie, Joyce, Hopper, Lucas, Max, Sarah, Craig, Dustin, and Cathy (Nancy had taken Karen and Holly to a matinee) to watch the tapes of the Karaoke night.

"Wow, you guys are tone deaf when you're drunk!" said Dustin as everyone laughed so hard they couldn't sit up straight while watching the recording of Mike and Will singing a duet of 'Piano Man.'

"Wait until you hear them attempt 'Tiny Dancer,'" said Jonathan.

"I don't remember doing two songs," said Will.

"You did four, actually," said Jonathan.

"That's it, I'm never drinking Long Island Ice Tea again," said Will.

"I dunno," said Julie. "Sure, we felt like crap the next day, but we have these amazing memories."

"Excellent point," said Will. "I just hope no one outside of this room ever sees a lot of this footage."

Will got his wish on that matter for about seven years. One day, Lucas and Dustin would get drunk and upload some clips to youtube. Mike and Will would be somewhat well-know authors and video game creators by that time and the videos would go viral.

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AN: Joyce decided to tell her sisters the truth about Eleven because she was really close to them growing up and wanted them to know. She realized she could trust them.

Mike's other two groomsmen were Sarah's boyfriend and a guy he and Will became friends with in college.

## 12. Chapter 12 Bill and Mikey

### Chapter 12

April 1999

"Oh, shit," said Julie as she put her hand over her mouth. She looked over and saw a raw fish before rushing to a garbage can and vomiting. Will followed her and rubbed her back then helped her to a bench when she finished. "Who the hell thought it would be a good idea to have fresh fish at the Spring Fair?"

"Mouth breathers," said Eleven as she and Mike joined Will and Julie on the bench. "Must have been men who couldn't fathom that pregnant women might go to a family fair."

"At least we're in the home stretch," said Julie. "Can you imagine going through all this during the summer? Hey, that stand has Elephant ears!"

"I can grab you one," said Will.

"That would be great," said Julie. "Can you have them put cinnamon instead of powdered sugar? It'll help settle my stomach."

"You got it," said Will. "How about you, El?" She nodded. "Mike?"

"I'm good," said Mike. He didn't feel like eating everything right after seeing Julie vomit a few seconds earlier and Eleven vomit a half hour before that.

Will returned a couple minutes later with two elephant ears and four gatorades. "Damn, these are good," said Julie.

"Better than eggos," said Eleven. "For now at least." Her favorite food had started tasting bad to her when she became pregnant.

"Eggos might be good again soon enough," said Will.

"Sooner than for you two," said Mike.

"Why does that matter?" asked Will.

"It matters because I beat you, Byers," said Mike teasingly.

"Beat me? Please! You're taking credit for my sister ovulating," said Will.

A few people passing by gave them strange looks and Will gave a nervous wave.

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May 1999

"Alright, El, it's time to push," said Dr. Miller. "Ready?"

Eleven wasn't sure if she was ready, but didn't have a choice. She nodded and pushed as she squeezed Mike's hand. "You've got this, El. I love you," said Mike.

Eleven screamed in pain as the lights began to flicker rapidly.

"Sorry, we need to fix the wiring in this hospital," said Dr. Miller.

"Don't worry about it," said Mike nervously as he messaged El's back with his free hand.

"Okay, El, it should be just one more push," said Dr. Miller. El took a few deep breaths just as Hopper had taught her when she was a kid and pushed with all her strength. "It's a boy!" said Dr. Miller as the couple heard their newborn child crying for the first time. "Wanna cut the cord, Dad?"

Mike hesitated for a moment, then grabbed the instrument from the nurse. He glanced at El who was watching while resting on her pillows. He snipped the chord carefully as he feared accidentally cutting his newborn son. The nurses cleaned the baby, swaddled him and handed him to Mike.

He stared at his son in wonder for a few seconds. He had felt love for the child when he looked at the ultrasounds or felt him kick, but looking him in the eyes brought it up to a whole new level. He

wondered if his own father had felt that way the day he was born. While Ted Wheeler was far from a terrible person, he'd never been the most affectionate father. He was certain that Eleven's father hadn't felt that sense of wonder.

Mike handed the newborn infant to Eleven. "Mike," she said as she started crying tears of joy. "He's perfect, he's so perfect."

"He really is," said Mike as he kissed Eleven's forehead. "He really is."

"Have you decided on a name?" asked Dr. Miller.

"We have," said Eleven. "William Jonathan Wheeler." She and Mike had decided to name their baby after the person they loved the most in the world if it was a boy. Eleven had known for months that she was having a boy as her abilities allowed her to see her baby in the womb. Finding out the sex had been an accident, though.

"We'll get you to the recovery room," said Dr. Miller as she wrote the name down on the label. "We can get this little guy to the nursery if you need to get some rest tonight."

"No, that's fine. He'll stay with us." said Eleven.

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"Hey, Sweetheart!" said Joyce in a voice barely above a whisper as she entered the room followed by Hopper, Will, Julie, Jonathan, and Nancy.

"Mom!" said Eleven as she held out her arms. Joyce walked over and hugged. Eleven was glad that she had her mother in her life and desperately needed to hug her after giving birth. Mike picked up baby William from his crib and handed him to Joyce.

"Meet your grandson: William Jonathan Wheeler. We decided to call him Bill, to avoid confusion," said Mike.

"Interesting call," said Will as Joyce took a seat.

"We were going to call our little one 'Mikey' to avoid confusion if it's a boy," said Julie.

"Julie, sit down," said Eleven. "I'm having sympathy pains for you in my legs."

Julie took a seat next to Joyce and looked at little Bill. "Is that better?" she asked. Eleven nodded. "Maybe you should sit down too, Nancy."

"My ankles are a little swollen," said Nancy as she sat next to Julie. She was at the end of her first trimester with her third child.

"You've more than doubled your number of grandchildren this year, Mom," said Jonathan. "What are you two naming your baby if it's a girl?" he asked Will and Julie.

"Veronica," said Julie. Eleven fidgeted with her blanket, she knew that Julie was having a boy as her ability had allowed her to see her nephew in the womb as well. She also knew that Nancy was having a boy as well.

"Is something wrong, Sweetheart?" Joyce asked Eleven as she stood up, handed her grandson to Will, and took Eleven's hand.

"Nothing, just, how are you and Dad feeling. is the cancer still in remission?" It was a good cover. She was concerned about her parents' health and there wasn't anything wrong with either of her sister-in-laws' pregnancies.

"We've been feeling great for over a year," said Hopper. "You got your wish for us to live to see your kid born."

"And we don't want to stop at seeing our grandchildren born," said Joyce. "We want to see them grow up as well."

"We all want that too," said Eleven.

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Later May 1999

"He must be hungry," said Julie as baby Michael Jonathan Byers started to fuss. Will picked him up and handed to his mother. When she was done feeding him, Will took him back to burp him, then



cleaned him up. Julie reached her him and Will handed him back. She patted the back next to her and Will climbed in putting his arm around her and looking at his newborn son.

"Do you need anything else?" asked Will. Julie shook her head and rested on Will's shoulder.

"You've been running yourself ragged for me the past few days... the past several months actually. Right now I just need you to sit with me," said Julie.

Will kissed her forehead and held Mikey's tiny hand. "Well, I want to give you whatever you need and I owe you." Will indicated his surgery scar.

"You don't owe me anything," said Julie.

"Well, you did have to carry this little guy 24-7 for nine months," said Will.

"That's a solid argument," said Julie.

"Knock, knock," said Mike as he and Eleven entered the room. He was pushing the baby carriage that contained baby William.

"Hey, guys, come on in," said Will. "What's going on?"

"What's going on is you two are about to be the happiest people on the planet," said Mike. He held up a disk.

"What's that?" asked Julie.

"Mike downloaded a bootleg of 'Graduation Day: Part Two' from one of his Canadian friends," said Eleven.

"Seriously?" said Julie with a delighted smile.

"Are you two ready to watch it?" asked Mike.

"Do you even need to ask?" said Will. "Joss Whedon was telling people to download it when the network pulled it, after all."

"Yeah, put it on!" said Julie. Mike pulled his laptop out of the case and powered it up before popping the disk in.

"Is it just me, or does Mayor Wilkins remind anyone else of Hawkins own Mayor Kline?" asked Will.

"It isn't just you," said Eleven. "Maybe Sunnydale is actually based on Hawkins."

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"It just occurred to me that these two have the same age difference as you and I," Mike told Will as they were both up and 2 in the morning giving bottles to their sons.

"Hmmm," said Will. "That's true."

"Do you think they'll be best friends as well?"

"Maybe," said Will. "Should we keep them apart until they start kindergarten just in case. We can see if your son approaches my son on the swings."

"El and your Mom will never go for that," said Mike.

"Probably not," said Will.

Mike looked around the nursery. "I'm going to miss this place when we all move out next year. El's eager to be able to get a dog again though. I am too if I'm being honest. Mom and Dad never let us have a dog and I want this guy to have dogs. It builds character."

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December 31, 1999

"Are you sure you're alright watching the kids tonight?" Jonathan asked Joyce, Phyllis, and Hopper.

"We're fine, honey," said Joyce. "I glad for the opportunity to spend time with my grandchildren."

"Yeah, and I'm too old to give a damn about the ball dropping," said Hopper. "And if this whole Y2K thing happens, this is probably the safest place for us."

"I doubt that'll be a problem," said Will. "Midnight has hit over half of the time zones on the planet and systems haven't been crashing."

"Good," said Hopper. "We can watch the Times Square countdown on TV without any glitches."

Will's cell phone rang and he saw Dustin's name on the caller ID. "Hey Dustin, how are Cathy and the babies doing?"

Will's question caught Mike's attention and he walked over. "They're doing great and I just figured something out." said Dustin

"Oh, really, what's that?" asked Will.

"We actually did achieve our goal. The girls were born at 5:58 am and 6:01 am," said Dustin.

"How is that achieving your goal of having twins born in two different millenia?" asked Mike.

"You get, don't you, Will?" asked Dustin.

"Sorry, I'm stumped," said Will.

"Are you guys seriously this dense? Lucas didn't get it either," said Dustin.

"New Zealand!" said Will. "I can't believe I didn't think of it already, I mean they're filming Lord of the Rings there!"

"What do the Lord of the Rings movies have to do with Dustin's goal?" asked Mike.

"The International Dateline," said Will. "It's midnight in New Zealand when it's 6 am Eastern time."

"I always knew you were the smartest, Byers," said Dustin. "I officially have the last baby born in 1999 and the first baby born in 2000."

"Technically, the last baby born in 1999 won't be born until right before 6 am our time," said Mike. "That's when Midnight hits the last times zone."

"C'mon, Wheeler, let me have this one," said Dustin.

"It's all yours," said Mike. "Congratulations!"

"I can't believe they did that," said Will. "I mean, getting pregnant is one thing, but managing to plan and have twins? I'm kinda impressed."

"If anyone was going to figure that out, it would be Dustin and Cathy, I just have no desire to know their process," said Mike.

Will cringed. "Yeah, me neither. We'll just settle on being happy for them."

"Eat some steaks tonight, guys," said Hopper as Barbara took a seat next to him on the sofa. We're having a family dinner tomorrow in Long Island and you don't need to be hungover in from of your kids."

"What's hungover?" asked Barbara.

"It's when people get really nasty headaches because they did stupid things," said Hopper.

"Don't worry, Hopper. We all want to remember tonight," said Will as he put on his coat. He, Julie, Jonathan, Mike, Nancy, and El all left quietly so they didn't wake the babies. Mikey and Bill were sleeping through the night, but Nancy and Jonathan's newborn Kyle wasn't yet. He was still under two months old.

Joyce stood up and walked over to the cribs (followed by Phyllis) of Bill and Mikey who were both sound asleep. Both babies had inherited their mother's hair color. Bill had brown hair like El and Mikey had black hair like Julie. This meant that each baby ended up having the hair color of the man for whom he was named. Joyce smiled and muttered "Little Michael Byers and little William Wheeler."

"Hmmm?" said Phyllis.

"Just remembering when Mike and Will were little. I was so glad that Will made a friend his first day of school," said Joyce. "And now they've named their first babies after each other.

"And Karen Bryce's son of all people," said Phyllis. "Not only did your son become her son's best friend, but two of your children married two of hers!"

"She was always nice enough to me in school, but I never would have predicted this," said Joyce.

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They had a great view of Times Square from the office with the party. The News Years concert from Washington DC played on the TV in one of the rooms. Several of Jonathan's friends were there, but Will (who still often felt awkward at parties) felt comfortable around time. The DJ was playing a lot of songs with the word "time" in the title. After he played Cher's 'Turn Back Time' (a song that about 18 1/2 years later, the party members wouldn't be able to hear without laughing thanks to seeing Deadpool 2), he put on on 'Time After Time.'

"You know what this means, Zombie Boy," said Julie as she tugged on Will's arm. "Let's go!" She led him to the dance floor, or at least to the area in the office where people were dancing.

"Zombie Boy?" said one of Jonathan's friends to Mike. "Isn't that a character in your game Contorted Passage?"

"Yep," said Mike. He smiled as he thought of the fact that Will had managed to turn a nickname that had once really bothered him into a hero in one of their games. Eleven and Jonathan smiled as well.

Julie started to giggle as she put her head on Will's shoulder. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"I was just remembering how awkward you were when I asked you to dance that night. I mean, Mike had to hit you twice before you said yes. It was cute, though."

"In all fairness, I was the town freak and didn't exactly expect anyone

to want to dance with me that night, so I was in a state of shock. That and I wasn't used to making decisions on even the simplest things without asking my friends or my Mom. I always had to ask Dustin and Lucas before making a D&D move and I had to look to Mom when Dr. Owens asked me my favorite candy."

"You did grow out of that pretty quick once you decided to though," said Julie.

"Yeah, once I stopped being scared of life," said Will.

"Let's find an empty room or closet, or something," said Julie when the song ended. "One last time for the end of the century."

"Um, we're at this party with people who still tend to freak out when I disappear," said Will.

"So send a telepathic message to your sister and tell her we're going somewhere to make out. That's at least partially true. Now hurry up. It's 11:20 and I want to find a good place before all the people who want to literally end the century with a bang take them."

"My, aren't you ardent tonight," said Will.

"I had a baby seven months ago, and I'm finally starting to feel physically normal again. Besides, that song got me thinking about high school."

"Alright, I owe you this," said Will. They found a room that appeared to be storage for old furniture. They pushed a couch in from of the door.

"This was lucky," said Julie as she pulled up his shirt and ran her fingers across his abdomen. He laughed.

"Hey, if you won't play fair, then neither will I," said Will as he tickled her armpit. She laughed.

"Playing fair is boring," said Julie as she pulled him to one of the couches. They were both remembering their last two and a half years of high school when they got away with sneaking around so often without people, even their closest friends knowing what they were

doing. Mostly because no one really suspected them of doing anything. Dustin and Lucas never let him forget once they found out- which had been an accident- though they hadn't brought it up since a few days before Mike and El's wedding.

*It was September of 1988 and the four original party members were hanging out in Mike's basement. Will was drawing a design of the Homecoming float while the others were having a discussion to which Will was only half paying attention.*

*"I just wonder what it's like, you know," said Dustin.*

*"What what's like?" asked Lucas.*

*"You know what I'm talking about," said Dustin.*

*"You're playing the pronoun game," said Mike with a grin. "We really don't."*

*"Don't make me say it," said Dustin.*

*"Don't make you say what?" asked Lucas with his eyebrows raised.*

*"Just say it, Dustin. We're now kids anymore...Unless you're scared to say it," said Mike.*

*"Sex, I wonder what sex is like," said Dustin as he threw up his hands. "And I'm pretty sure you assholes are wondering as well."*

*"It's super awkward at first," said Will absently as he colored the tiger he had just drawn.. "But it gets better once you get used to it."*

*"Did you just say what I thought you said, Byers?" asked Lucas.*

*"Huh?" said Will as he glanced up at his friends.*

*"You just said it's awkward at first, but it gets better once you get used to it," said Dustin.*

*"I believe he said it's super awkward at first," said Lucas with a grin. Will looked mortified.*

*"Do you guys think you could forget what I just said?" asked Will.*

*"I don't think that's possible," said Dustin. "I can't believe \*you\* were the first. It's always the quiet ones-although Mike's being pretty quiet. Are you an El?"*

*"Don't answer that, Mike!" said Will.*

*"Why don't you want him to answer?" asked Lucas. "It could take some heat off of you."*

*"Because his girlfriend is my sister!" said Will.*

*"Don't you and El have a telepathic link?" asked Dustin. "You should already know the answer."*

*"We do," said Will. "But we don't use it all day, every day, you know. That would be super gross."*

*"So," said Lucas. "Do you have any advice for us?"*

*"Advice?" said Will.*

*"Yes, advice," said Lucas. "Spill it, you stud, you."*

*"I'm an expert," said Will.*

*"You know more than we do," said Dustin.*

*"And you guys know your own girlfriends," said Will.*

*"What if they don't want to do it?" asked Dustin.*

*"Then don't do it," said Will.*

*"That's easy for you to say," said Dustin.*

*"Do you really want to do it if Cathy doesn't want to?" asked Will.*

*"Well, no. Of course not," said Dustin.*

*"How can we tell if they want to?" asked Lucas.*



*"I don't know, maybe ask?" said Will.*

*"Is that how you figured things out with Julie?" asked Dustin. Will shrugged.*

*"I don't know. I had just recovered from my surgery, her parents were really nagging her about not doing it and that abstinence speaker from Snerling really pissed us off, so we just figured screw it..literally."*

*"Holy shit! That was a year and a half ago," said Dustin. "And you've kept it from us all this time?"*

*"Can we not talk about this anymore, please," said Will.*

Just as they were finishing, someone started pushing on the door, but the couch they'd put there was heavy enough to stop them. "Um, someone's in here," Will called.

"Ooops, sorry, dude," said an unfamiliar voice.

"I told you we should have found a room sooner, dumbass!" said a woman's voice as the unseen man closed the cracked door. Will and Julie laughed as they curled into each other. She reached up and messed up his hair.

"You were right about timing," said Will.

"Of course, I was," said Julie. "Was following me instincts."

"I love you," Will whispered in her ear. "Just wanted to say that one last time before the end of the century."

"I love you too," Julie whispered. "I just realized that we ended the 90s the same way we ended the 80s. Though a party in New York City is more fun and less stressful than a party in Hawkins on our first winter break of college."

"Agreed," said Will.

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"Someone's in here," Mike called as someone started to open the door.

Eleven managed to block whoever it was with telekinesis.

"Sorry," an unknown man called before closing the slightly cracked open door. Mike reached over and picked up his watch from the supply shelf.

"It's 11:49, we'd better get back if we want to see the ball drop," said Mike. Eleven picked her dress up off the floor and brushed it off. When they got dressed and went back out into the hallway, Will and Julie were leaving another room. They looked slightly flustered when they saw Mike and El.

"Hey, um, we were just practicing making out so we don't look really stupid in from of all these sophisticated New Yorkers when the ball drops," said Will.

"What a coincidence, so were we," said Mike with a grin.

"Let's hurry and get back to the party, we only have 7 minutes!" said El. They hurried down the hall and spotted Nancy and Jonathan standing near the window. Jonathan gestured them over is he help his camcorder.

Jonathan recorded everyone as they counted down while the ball dropped an then celebrated the moment the new century hit. He felt a sense of hope. Everything seemed to be going so well for the people he loved. He thought of the significance of the fact that was standing in a building that was mere blocks from the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and the World Trade Center.

## 13. Chapter 13

### Chapter 13

September 11, 2001

Jonathan walked toward Central Park with his younger son Kyle. His older children: Barbara and Edmund were at school. Nancy had taken an early shift at the hospital. Her colleagues had cautioned her to take it easy. She was pregnant with their fourth child. She was trying to finish her requirements to get completely certified as a surgeon, but four pregnancies slowed things down.

Jonathan was on an assignment with New Yorker magazine to take some end of summer pictures around Manhattan. He had decided to walk that morning, not knowing what he was going to see.

Suddenly, he heard a crashing noise that sounded like some sort of explosion. People started screaming. Jonathan saw smoke in the sky. He looked over and, even though it was several blocks away, he could see that one of the towers for the World Trade Center was on fire. Jonathan snapped a couple pictures. He was near his apartment and decided to go up and get a better look. He picked up Kyle.

Jonathan mounted his camcorder on the tripod. Within two minutes of pressing record, a plane flew into the second tower. Jonathan froze in shock. He picked up his cell phone to call his children's school, but the line was busy. Barbara's school and Edmund's preschool were further away from the buildings than their apartment was, so Jonathan took comfort in that.

He pushed Nancy's name in the contacts on his phone. She picked up. "Jonathan, are you alright?"

"I'm fine Nance. Kyle and I are both fine. I just can't get a hold of the kids schools," said Jonathan.

"Dispatch says the schools are fine. They're telling everyone to stay where they are because there's a lot of panic," said Nancy.

Jonathan looked down to the street. He saw chaos. He then looked over at the towers and saw objects falling from the windows before he realized that people were jumping. "Holy shit, Nancy, people are jumping!"

"I have to go, they're setting up triage. Listen to me, Jonathan, I need you to stay calm for Kyle. When things start to settle, pick up the kids at school and take them back home. I love you."

Jonathan put on a video for Kyle to distract him. He grabbed his camera and started taking pictures. In less than an hour, he watched in horror as both towers collapsed. He had been a small child when construction was finished and he never thought he'd see the day that they just weren't there anymore. Several blocks were covered in black smoke and debris. Jonathan was grateful that neither Nancy's hospital, nor his children's schools were in those blocks.

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"They're all okay," said El as she came out of the closet and wiped blood from her nose. She was glad that she hadn't left for work yet when the news hit. She was able to go to her parents place and let them know that Jonathan, Nancy, and the children were alright.

"Thank God!" said Joyce as she sat down and buried her face in her hands while Hopper watched the news coverage. He took her hand.

Mike, Will, and Julie came through the door. Eleven ran over and hugged Mike. "Are you guys alright?" asked Joyce as she got up. Julie went over to the play pen, picked up Mikey and hugged him.

"We're fine, Mom," said Will as he took her hands. "They think the Sears Tower may have been a target so a lot of things are closing down town. We got on the first train back. I'm just glad Jonathan, Nancy, and the kids are okay." Eleven had told Will telepathically about seeing Jonathan.

Mike's phone rang. "Holly?... Hang on, I'll be right there to pick you up."

"Is she okay?" asked El.

"Yeah, the Universities are canceling classes for a few days. She took a train out here," said Mike. He went back out to his car and headed for the station.

"Have you heard from Sarah?" Will asked Hopper. "Philly has got to be crazy right now with Flight 93 crashing."

"Yeah. The phone lines aren't down there like they are in New York," said Hopper. "We used to have atomic bomb drills when I was in school, but I never thought I'd see anything like this happen."

"Me neither," said Will. "Mind if I use your computer? Maybe Jonathan or Nancy emailed us."

Sure, go ahead Buddy," said Hopper.

El picked up Bill as she and Joyce sat next to Julie on the couch. Will saw an email from Jonathan and his stomach twisted in knots as he read it. Jonathan said that he was okay and wasn't sure when he'd have the time to email again. Nancy was busy at the hospital. Will typed a quick reply and sent it.

"Is everything alright, Sweetheart?" asked Joyce as Will closed the email.

"Yeah, Jonathan was out with Kyle when the first plane hit. He went right up to his apartment and saw the second plane hit. He saw some messed up stuff," said Will.

Mike returned with Holly. "You haven't heard from Jonathan and Nancy in the last 20 minutes, have you?" he asked.

"Jonathan emailed," said Will. "Nancy's on triage at the hospital."

Mike sat at the table. "I just feel like we should be doing something more than sitting and watching the news."

"There's a blood bank a couple blocks away," said Julie.

"They'll probably need plenty of it," said Hopper. "Let's go!"

El handed Bill to Joyce and walked over to Mike. "Can I talk to you

for a minute, Mike?"

"Yeah, sure," said Mike. They walked into the spare bedroom. "What is it?"

"I'm pregnant."

"Are you sure?" asked Mike. He felt a small burst of happiness, then guilt for being happy after everything that had happened that morning.

El nodded. "I started to suspect I might be yesterday, so I got a test. The one I got said it was best to take it in the morning... and.. well it was positive. I don't want to tell everyone yet. I can't give blood, obviously."

"Don't worry, we'll come up with a cover story," said Mike.

"I'm not superstitious or anything, but I don't want to do anything to put them at risk."

"Them?"

"Yeah, I looked and there were two."

[illegible]

"We were able to stop the labor," said Dr. Klinger. "But I'd like to keep you here a couple days to be safe."

"Is the baby alright?" asked Nancy.

"She's fine," said Dr. Klinger. "I think you should take a leave of absence though, Nancy."

"What? I need to finish my residency," said Nancy.

"You need to keep yourself and your baby healthy. You can't finish your residency when you've got an at-risk pregnancy."

"Are you alright?" asked Jonathan after Dr. Klinger left. "This isn't exactly what you planned for your life. At least not the whole nuclear

family thing."

Nancy smiled. "At least we aren't living in a house at the end of a cul de sac.

"I'm sorry," said Jonathan. "You shouldn't have to keep putting your career on hold."

"Jonathan, I wouldn't trade our lives for anything. Besides, we may be doing the whole nuclear family thing, but we're nothing like my parents.

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The next morning, Jonathan was developing pictures when his boss came in. "Hey there, Byers, you got some great footage, do you mind if we use it?"

"Yeah, go ahead, Russell," said Jonathan. "Keep the tape. I really have no desire to watch it again."

"Speaking of footage, I know your still finishing up that Madison Square Garden documentary. I have a friend with an office in Chicago with a great editing suite. He said you can use it over the next couple of months. We could also use a good photographer there, and I understand you have family there."

"What do you mean?" asked Jonathan.

"I heard about your wife. We've lost a lot of lives and I want to prevent as many people as possible from losing their lives in the future. I think it would be good for both of you if you're out of New York until the baby comes."

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September 20, 2001

"Why is it that Jon Stewart gave the most thoughtful commentary on this whole mess?" asked Will as they sat down to the first episode of The Daily Show since the attacks. Jonathan and Nancy had arrived the day before. They were staying with Mike and El for the next six

months. They had decided to stay up until 11 pm and watch The Daily Show together so they could unwind. The pundit heavy 24 hour news networks were getting on their nerves.

"He's usually just trying to be funny and not dictate to the audience what to think," said Mike.

"I'm going to go out and get some fresh air before I turn in," said Jonathan. He turned to Nancy and put his hand on hers. "Do you need anything?" Nancy shook her head.

Mikey woke up in the play pen and started fussing. Julie and Will went over to check on him. It was almost time for them to go back to their own house anyway. "I think he needs a clean diaper," said Julie. "At least he making it through the day without accidents."

"Let's get this guy cleaned up," said Will.

"I can get it," said Julie. "Your brother looks like he needs someone to talk to. Mind if I use your changing table, El?"

El nodded and Will went to the back porch to talk to his brother. Mike and El's Basset Hound Skippy followed him out and dashed into the back yard.

"Hey," said Will as Jonathan leaned on the rail of the back porch.

"Hey, Bud," said Jonathan. Will walked over and leaned on the rail next to his brother. He decided to just ask.

"What's on your mind? I mean other than the 'America Under Attack' stuff."

Jonathan looked at Will carefully. He decided to just tell him. "When Nancy had her false labor, I said some things I wish I hadn't."

"What did you say?"

"Well, Nancy was put on leave it's delaying her finishing her residency. It's the fourth time she's had to put it on hold and well... We always thought the whole nuclear family thing was lame when we were in school..."



"Did you say you regretted having kids or something?" asked Will.

"Not in so many words," said Jonathan. "I just kept thinking about how Lonnie made us feel all the time growing up. I don't want my children to ever feel that way."

"They won't," said Will.

"We can't be sure of that," said Jonathan.

"Yes we can because you're a good person and you don't want your kids to feel what we felt," said Will.

"Will's right," said El as she stepped out onto the porch. She walked over to her brothers and put an arm around each of them. She felt a little weird not telling them she was pregnant yet, but wanted to wait until she finished her first trimester. "He may be the baby of the family, but he's right."

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"We were never as close as they were," said Nancy to Mike and Holly as she glanced at the three Byers siblings on the back porch.

"How many siblings are that close?" Holly remarked as she glanced up from her text book.

"Well, they've all been through more than most siblings," said Mike.

"That's true," said Nancy. "Since we're going to be here for the next six months, we don't we work on our sibling relationship?"

"We can do that," said Mike. "For real this time though."

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November 2001

"They didn't have the part where Ron and Neville beat up Draco at the Hufflepuff match," said Barbara as she, Will and Julie exited the theater the day after Thanksgiving. It was their second time seeing *Harry Potter*. Barbara hoped that her favorite parts from the book that

had been cut from the movie would somehow be there the second time.

"They can never fit everything from the book into the movie," said Will and he and Julie took Barbara's hands. They started looking for Mike and El, who had Edmund to see *Monsters inc.* Nancy liked the Harry Potter books well enough and was grateful that they were the first non-picture books that her seven year old daughter was reading on her own; but felt that Edmund was still a little too young to read them or see the movie.

"Why not?" asked Barbara.

"Studios like to keep the movies short," said Julie. "Because they're afraid people won't want to sit through long movies."

"They will if the movies are good," said Barbara.

"Maybe you should be a movie producer when you grow up," said Julie. "You can make them as long as you want them to be."

Will spotted Mike and El in the arcade. Edmund was sitting on Mike's lap and steering the Artic Thunder wheel. El was just starting to show. She waved at them.

"How was Harry Potter?" she asked when they reached her.

"I liked it, but they still didn't have the Hufflepuff match," said Barbara.

"That's a bummer," said Mike. "We can read that part together when we get home."

"Okay," said Barbara.

"How was your movie, Edmund?" asked Will.

"Mike Wazowski burped up a microphone," said Edmund.

"Sounds great," said Will.

"Uncle Mike, can I pinch Grandpa Wheeler's nose if he snores?" asked

Edmund.

"We'll see," said Mike.

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"Not you, Mikey," said Karen as she made a shooing gesture at the toddler. "This is just a picture of *my* grandchildren."

Mikey's smile faded. He looked at Kyle and Bill. "Mikey, I need to you move now," said Karen more firmly. She got up, picked Mikey off the couch, set him to one side and started taking pictures of Bill and Kyle. Mikey stared for a moment, then turned and ran out of the room.

"What the hell was that?" asked Nancy as Karen started taking pictures. She had been sitting in the other room. Her feet and back had been really sore, but she finally decided to confront her mother. "He's just a baby. Why did you have to treat him like that?"

"Like what?" asked Karen. She looked around. "Where did Mikey go?"

"You were treating him like crap and were too busy to notice him running out."

"Nancy, I just wanted to get a couple pictures of my grandchildren," said Karen.

"What's going on?" asked Jonathan. He had been working on the computer in the den and overheard his wife and mother-in-law arguing and came to investigate.

"Oh, my mom just drove our nephew to tears," said Nancy.

"I didn't mean to hurt his feelings!" said Karen hastily. "I'll go talk to him."

"No, I'll take care of it," said Jonathan. "Go ahead and finish taking your pictures."

"Jonathan, wait," said Karen.

"He's got this, Mom," said Nancy.

Jonathan found Mikey sitting with Skippy in the game room. He was sitting on the floor and staring at the wall. "Hey, Bud," said Jonathan as he knelt beside his nephew and put his hand on the toddler's shoulder.

Mikey glanced at Jonathan, sniffed and wiped his eyes. Memories of Will as a small child flooded Jonathan's mind. Although Karen hadn't intentionally been cruel as Lonnie had so many times, Mikey had gotten the message that she didn't want him around. Jonathan didn't know how to explain that to a two year old without making things worse.

He picked up his nephew and pulled him into a hug. Mikey started sobbing as Jonathan rocked him back and forth. "Hey, I've been working on a new mix CD for your Dad. Would you like to hear it?"

Mikey looked up silently for a moment, then nodded. Jonathan skipped the living room as he carried Mikey to the study. He saved his documentary work before pulling up the file of his latest mix CD for Will. Nancy and Karen were starting to shout. Mikey glanced in the direction of the voices. Jonathan briefly considered going to get Kyle and Bill, but decided to simply close the door to the study.

Jonathan wished he had his record player in the room with him as digital wasn't the same. He found an MP3 of the Clash's London Calling and decided to play it. "I used to play this band for your Dad all the time. He really loved it." Mikey smiled at Jonathan and started bobbing his head. Jonathan reflected on the lyrics of the song and how people feared nuclear war during the cold war era. He felt like similar fears had been growing in the past couple months.

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"I just wanted a picture of my grandchildren, Nancy," said Karen. "I didn't mean to hurt Mikey's feelings, but he wasn't listening when I asked him to move. He's not my flesh and blood. He just isn't."

"Okay, first of all: there are more tactful ways to ask a kid to move. I could have come and gotten him. Second of all, I know he's not your

flesh and blood, but why should that matter? None of our kids are Hopper's flesh and blood and he loves them. Joyce has always treated Sarah like her own daughter. Shoot, every time Holly comes over, Joyce and everyone else treat her like part of the family."

"Well, Holly isn't Joyce's daughter, she's my daughter!" said Karen. "And so are you!. Mike is my son; but you all seem to prefer Joyce."

"You know what, Mom? We've all gotten pretty close to Joyce because she welcomed us with open arms, but us being close to her isn't some sort of slight against you. The number of people we consider to be family just happens to be growing. By the way, that little boy you made a point to push aside because he isn't your flesh and blood was named after your only son."

"Hey, is everything alright?" Nancy and Karen looked up to see Mike standing in the doorway to the foyer. Will, El, Julie, Barbara and Edmund were all standing with him. Will glanced at the spot near the couch where Kyle and Bill were playing with building blocks.

"Where's Mikey?" asked Will.

"Jonathan's with him," said Nancy. "He's a little upset, that's all."

"It's my fault," said Karen. "I asked him to move when I was taking a picture of Kyle and Edmund. I think I was more harsh than I meant to be and hurt his feelings. I'm so sorry."

Will was silent for a few seconds as he stared blankly at Karen. He then nodded. "It's alright. We all make mistakes. You just want to spend time with your children and grandchildren. Tell you what. Julie, Mikey and I will go back to my place. I'll call my Mom and tell her to meet us at my house when she, Hopper, Sarah, and Kyle are done at the VA party."

"Will, you don't have to-" Mike started. Will held up his hand.

"We've been getting to spend time with you guys practically every day. Your Mom hasn't and she and your Dad are leaving tomorrow. Just have a nice time."

Will followed the sound of the music Jonathan was playing for Mikey

to the study. A few moments later, he emerged from the room carrying his son and followed by his brother. He put Mikey's jacket on and grabbed his duffle bag. He and Julie started to head out the front door.

"Wait!" said Karen. She grabbed a container full of cookies she'd baked and approached them. She held the container up to Mikey.

"Here, have a cookie, Mikey."

"Um Um," said Mikey as he shook his head and buried it in Will's neck.

"C'mon, try one. How about you: Will? Julie?"

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler," said Julie. "But we're still full from the nachos and candy we had at the movie."

"Then I can wrap some up for you to take home," said Karen as she turned and headed back to the kitchen.

"Look, we don't want your goddam cookies, Mrs. Wheeler!" said Will at a near shout. Will looked like he regretted his words immediately. "Sorry, we've all been under a lot of stress lately. Sorry Nancy, Sorry, Mike. Just spend some quality time with your Mom. El, Jonathan, we'll see you tomorrow."

"Uncle Will, don't go," said Barbara as she started crying and ran to hug him. He handed Mikey to Julie and knelt to hug Barbara.

"Hey, don't worry, you'll see me again tomorrow. Just spend some time with your Grandma Wheeler, alright?"

Barbara sniffled. "Okay."

Will stood up, took Mikey back from Julie and they left.

"El and Jonathan picked up Bill and Kyle and took them up to the nursery room. Nancy sat down as her feet were starting to hurt. She glanced at her father sitting in the corner of the living room. He had managed to sleep through everything. He was getting better at sleeping through things as he got older.

"Can I get you something to drink, Nancy?" asked Mike.

"Sure," said Nancy. "Do you have any of that punch left over from yesterday?"

"Yeah," said Mike. He went to the kitchen. Karen followed him.

"I'm really sorry about all that, Michael."

"I know you are, Mom," said Mike. "But Will is family to me. You don't have to consider him to be family to you, but respect the fact that he's family to me."

"I'm well aware that you two have always been close. But how many people remain that close to a friend they met in Kindergarten? It's not normal."

Mike rolled his eyes. He glanced at his 'normal' father snoring in the living room. "I've never wanted to be normal. Neither has Nancy or Holly. We're all happy with our 'not normal' lives. Can you try to be happy for us?"

"Yes, of course," said Karen.

"Good," said Mike. "Holly should be back from her study group session any time now. Let's figure out what to do tonight."

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Will took Julie and Mikey's coats and hung them up in the closet with his own. He called Hopper's cell phone to let him know to come to his house instead of Mike's when they finished at the VA. Of course, Hopper started asking Will if he was alright and Will had told him about losing his temper a few minutes earlier.

Julie went to the kitchen and grabbed a couple ginger ales and a juice box for Mikey. "Should we pop in a DVD and just relax?" Will asked her.

"Sounds good." said Julie.

"How's your stomach doing?"

"I'm only slightly queasy at the moment, but hopefully this ginger ale will help."

"Fingers crossed," said Will. "Which movie do you wanna watch, big guy?"

"Woody," said Mikey. He walked over to the DVD shelf and grabbed Toy Story 2.

"Woody, it is," said Will as Mikey handed him the DVD. Will looked at Julie and smiled. "It may be the 1000th time, but this is a great movie. At least we don't have a kid who only wants to watch Barney or the Teletubbies."

"Yeah, we have it pretty good," said Julie. "Just don't mention Barney or the teletubbies too much. We don't need to give this little one-" Julie patted her not yet swelling abdomen. "-any ideas."

Will mimed zipping his lips. They both laughed before Will's face fell. "I shouldn't have lost my temper like that. She is Mike and Nancy's mother. I should've shown better control when I had Mikey in my arms. Julie sighed and took a seat on the sofa. Mikey walked over to her as he carried his Woody doll. She pulled him up onto the sofa next to her.

"Sure, you can work on controlling that temper that you almost never lose, but she does have a way of pushing people's buttons."

"Well, she's not a horrible person," said Will.

"No, she isn't; but she had an easy life for a long time so she didn't exactly work super hard on her relationship with her kids. Now they've moved out of town and she has to work at keeping in touch with them. Also, she never had to worry about the things your mom had to worry about. My mom didn't have to worry about those things either. It's hard for people who have always gotten their way to suddenly not get their way."

"I guess," said Will. "I feel a little bad for her. I'm still pissed that she made Mikey cry, but I know she didn't mean to. And she does have a right to spend quality time with Mike and Nancy when she visits."



"Yeah, but she has to learn to pay attention to other people- or at least her own kids," said Julie. "Is there anything else you want or need to talk about?"

"Not really. It just still scares me a little when I do lose my temper."

"I know," said Julie. "I'm glad you want to try to control, just promise me you won't hold it in or suppress it or something."

"I promise," said Will.

"Daddy! Woody and Buzz!" said Mikey.

"You're right, Mikey. It's time to start the movie. Sorry about that, Buddy."

Will popped in the DVD and skipped the previews. He took a seat on the couch, pulled Mikey onto his lap and put his arm around Julie. She rested her head on his shoulder. The moment made Will think about how sorry he felt for Karen Wheeler. Mike had mentioned that he couldn't remember ever seeing his parents cuddle. That revelation didn't surprise Will. He had spent a lot of time at the Wheeler house growing up. While Mike's parents had never fought like Will's mother had with his birth father, he never exactly got the impression that they enjoyed each other's company.

Hopper, Joyce, Sarah, and Craig arrived shortly after. Hopper and Craig were carrying bags with taco ingredients from Carnitas. "I figured we'd bring something since all the leftover turkey is at Mike and El's place," said Hopper.

"Great, I've been craving tacos all afternoon," said Julie. She glanced at Will, hoping that no one made the connection as she was only a few weeks along and they weren't telling anyone yet.

"Let's go get some plates and silverware," said Sarah to Craig as she tugged his arm and they went to the kitchen.

"There's my little grandson," said Hopper as he went over, picked up Mikey, and started tickling a laughing Mikey. Will smiled as he remembered Nancy saying that it didn't matter to Hopper that the new generation of Byers children weren't his own flesh and blood.

"Did you two have a good time with Barbara at the movie?" Joyce asked Julie and Will.

"Yes, she's a fun little girl," said Julie.

"I'm going to miss them when they go back to New York in the spring," said Joyce. "But it is their home."

"We have a few months," said Will. "We just have to make the most of it."

"Look at this little guy," said Hopper to Sarah and Craig as they set the table. Will, Julie, and Joyce started to help them. "Don't you want one of your very own."

"It'll happen when it happens, Dad," said Sarah with a small smile.

"Hey, Will, Julie, help me out here," said Hopper. "Will, give her some brotherly advice about how much you love being a parent. Julie, you can talk to her as a woman."

"Dad!" said Sarah with a laugh.

"What?" said Hopper. "I'm greedy and I want more grandchildren. C'mon, Joyce, back me up."

"I want more grandchildren too," said Joyce with a smile. "But Sarah and Craig will have kids when they're ready and when they do, we'll spoil those kids rotten."

"You bet we will," said Hopper.

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December 2001

"I think I put more miles on that mini van just driving here from New York, than I have in the four years since I got it," said Jonathan to Will as he gave baby Charlotte her bottle after bringing her home from the hospital. "We just don't drive a lot in New York."

"We almost always take the train when we go into Chicago," said

Will. "It's just a pain the try and drive there."

"Yeah, I doubt I'll drive the van very much once we go back to New York."

"For what it's worth, I'll miss you when you go," said Will.

"Me too, Bud, me too," said Jonathan.

"How's the newest Byers baby doing?" asked Hopper as he entered to room followed by Mike.

"She's eating well," said Jonathan as he sat down, threw a cloth over his shoulder and started to burp Charlotte. "Are all the women in our lives still soaking their feet?" El, Joyce, Nancy, Sarah, Julie, and Holly were all soaking their feel in luxury bath salts together.

"Yep," said Mike. "They all need it too for one reason or another."

"Did you guys leave poor Craig alone with the kids?"

"It was Hopper's idea," said Mike.

"I'm trying to show him and Sarah how great kids are," said Hopper.

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2002

2002 was the year that each of the original four party members had daughters. For Dustin, it was his third daughter and fifth child. Cathy gave birth to a daughter named Debbie in February. For Mike, Lucas, and Will, they had daughters for the first time. Lucas and Max's daughter ( and third child) Sandra was born shortly after Debbie.

In April, El gave birth to twins: a boy and a girl that she and Mike named Gage and Josephine. She was gripped with terror for a while as she herself had been taken from her mother at birth and separated from her family for over 13 years (14 years before she know Will was her twin). She had felt a sense of panic when Bill was born.

"It's going to be alright, Sweetheart, they'll be safe," said Joyce as she

hugged Eleven while Mike put the babies down them to rest.

"How can we be sure?" asked El.

"Because you aren't alone like I was," said Joyce. "Lonnie told you himself: he was trying to keep my isolated from others. You have so many people who are here for you and you have a long lost cousin in a powerful position. These two are going to have the childhood that you were denied, I promise."

In July, Julie experienced a difficult birth. She suffered a lot of blood loss and got an infection, but baby Veronica was healthy. The doctors told her and Will that she most likely would not be able to have anymore children.

Julie started to cry as Will put down Veronica for her nap. "Hey," said Will softly as he went over to her and pulled her into a hug.

"I'm happy with the children we have, Will, I really am. I always thought that I didn't want more than two children when I was growing up; but now being told I can't have anymore..."

"It's not impossible," said Will. "Let yourself heal and maybe we can look into options in the future if we want more children."

"Alright," said Julie. She glanced at Veronica who had drifted off to sleep. "She really is the most beautiful baby girl ever born, isn't she?"

"She really is," said Will.